what kind of man doesn't

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what kind of man doesn't

by menocchio

Summary

He was a couple miles out of town when he saw the hitchhiker standing on the shoulder of the other lane, a dusty backpack at his feet. And Johnny was fully prepared to speed along, except when he flicked a look over in passing, it was Daniel LaRusso glancing back.

Blacktop Oblivion

Does it got the torque? the power?
a certain point before you turn nineteen
you think your engine might be the problem.

From your first set of wheels
you thought you understood freedom.
go fast, go far,
at some point you always had to turn around.

But nothing could touch you
so long as you were going over forty.

And music didn't sound the same when still.

One year to get it together and what did you do with it?

Got dumped, got lost, got choked
and that was only the first semester.

You were buzz racing jim towards a cliff,
foot on the gas, eyes on the other driver.
you forgot to hit the brakes,
driven to distraction by a pair of fierce brown eyes.

The car doesn't feel quite real around you anymore
but that's because you're still falling.
you have to believe it'll be real when you land.

Oblivion to Victorville

Johnny woke up over in Victorville.

He was curled up in his back seat, cheek sticking to the leather and head pounding, or maybe that was the sputtering truck parked nearby, its engine backfiring like an opening shot at the races.

He'd really half-assed pulling up his top the night before, and the sun was shining directly in his face. He screwed up his eyes, took a breath, and hauled himself upright.

Fuck. A mistake.

He lunged for the gap in his top and stuck his head out of the car. He held there for a full minute, abdomen tensed against the nausea. He did not throw up. The desert breeze was hot but still a welcome relief against the tight, sweaty skin of his face.

Eventually he got out and went over to the gas station to use its toilet and splash some water on his face over the tiny tin sink. In the cracked mirror, he was pink like sunburn. He wondered what time it was, how long he'd been there.

Back at his car, he dug through his trunk among the empties until he found a bottle that still had some water in it. He drained it in one go; the water was stale and warm, and he had to hold his breath again to make sure it stayed down. After, he tossed the bottle on the ground and went around to the driver's side, key in hand.

He sat staring out at the brown landscape for a while, reluctant to start the car, because he knew once he did he'd have to go back. His eyes traced the contours of the hills in the distance, and he wished he could drive up into them and disappear. But that was as impossible as if the hills were painted scenery.

“Alright, alright,” he muttered and turned the ignition.

He was a couple miles out of town when he saw the hitchhiker standing on the shoulder of the other lane, a dusty backpack at his feet. And Johnny was fully prepared to speed along, except when he

flicked a look over in passing, it was Daniel LaRusso glancing back.

Johnny stomped on the brakes, coming to a complete standstill in the middle of the road. He stared in his rearview mirror and then twisted in his seat to stare over his shoulder for good measure.

Fifty feet away, unheard but obvious from his expression and the movement of his mouth, LaRusso said, “Oh, you gotta be kidding me.”

Finally, someone having a worse day than him. Johnny's mouth curled and without thinking too much about it, he put the car in reverse, wrapped a hand around the back of the passenger seat, and backed the car up until he was idling alongside LaRusso.

In deference to the punishing heat, Daniel was down to a sleeveless black shirt and jean shorts, a flannel wrapped around his hips. He didn't take his sunglasses off when he looked back at Johnny, but his displeasure was evident in the set of his mouth.

At least three possible quips sprang to Johnny's mind, but when he spoke, somehow what came out was only, “What're you doing out here, LaRusso?”

“Sunbathing, what's it look like?” came the short reply.

“Need a ride?” he asked, not even really offering. More like rubbing his face in it.

“I'd rather take my chances with the zodiac killer, thanks.” He stared hard into the distance, but the road remained stubbornly empty. He sighed, grimaced. “You're going to the wrong direction, anyway. I'm going east.”

“Don't tell me you're going to hitchhike all the way to – what, Jersey, right?” he said on a guess.

Daniel shrugged. “Beats Greyhound.”

Johnny tapped his steering wheel. “And what if no one picks you up?”

“I'll figure it out.”

A vehicle was coming up fast behind Johnny. Under Daniel's confused eye, he eased to the shoulder and then performed a U-turn, so he ended up parked in front of him on the other side. Then he hopped out and bent to take hold of the straps of Daniel's bag.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he demanded. He made a belated grab for it, and Johnny held it out of reach. Jesus, the paranoia on this guy.

“I'm giving you a ride.”

“Didn't you hear what I just said? I'm not going back to the valley, I have to get to Parsippany.”

Johnny tossed the bag into the back seat, and then put an arm up to block Daniel's subsequent lunge for it. The block turned into a second one as Daniel threw a fist, and they spent the next twenty seconds tussling in the dirt on the side of the road as a busload of Mormons passed, cleancut heads turning and staring down at them.

“Would you just – *cool* – *it*,” gritted Johnny, disengaging after one last kick, which Daniel evaded. “I'm trying to help you, man.”

“And why would you do that?” snapped Daniel. He bent to snatch his sunglasses off the ground from where they'd fallen during the fight.

“I – I don't know, I'm bored.” And he didn't want to go home. “Figured I could drive you as far as, like, Flagstaff or something.” He thought about it. “You're more likely to find another ride there anyway, more routes go through Flagstaff. This place is dead.”

“And you'd do that, you'd give me a ride. In exchange for what?”

“Let's just say you'd owe me one,” said Johnny. “Well?”

Daniel's jaw was still tight, and all at once he realized the other boy was more nervous than angry. They hadn't talked much after the tournament last December. He must've thought Johnny was still out to get him, despite a whole eight months passing in peace.

“Look, I'm not trying to mess with you,” he said, trying to sound honest. And when Daniel still hesitated, he added, “There's,” fuck it, “there's some shit going down at home right now, and I'd just as soon skip it, okay.”

Daniel scuffed his sneaker through the dirt. He was silent, visibly fighting with himself since he couldn't fight Johnny. Then: “Flagstaff, huh?”

Johnny raised his hands. “Flagstaff.”

“Alright,” he said abruptly. He turned and opened the Avanti's

passenger door. “Even we can probably avoid killing each other for that long, right?”

And maybe it was the hangover finally easing, but Johnny could suddenly breathe easily, some pressure in his head backing off and leaving the day feeling clear and open.

Victorville to Ludlow

Chapter Notes

> Just a reminder that Johnny is a boy in 1985 and uses language like one.

Daniel settled into the car like he owned it, elbow thrown out to the side and spine going liquid against the soft leather seat. Johnny would mind the attitude more if they weren't in the Avanti, but his car had this effect on people. She was just that sweet.

Daniel tilted his skinny hips up to dig into his shorts pocket and came up with a stick of gum. He waved it at Johnny, who wasn't asking, and said, “Haven't had a chance to brush my teeth this morning.”

Johnny hadn't brushed in over a day at that point. He ran his tongue over the fuzzy front of his teeth and thought about asking if he had any more gum.

“So what's in Parsimony?” he asked instead.

Daniel settled in the corner of the seat and folded the gum into his mouth. He cocked his head. “Parsimony? Parsippany.”

“Parsippany? Where the hell's that.”

“Jersey. What the hell is parsimony.”

And Johnny didn't know, he did real bad on his SATs.

“And it's my Uncle Louie,” continued Daniel, hair ruffling in the wind as he put his head back. “His emphysema's acting out, and he needs some help until his insurance coughs up the dough for a day nurse. Ma's got this new job in Fresno that's actually going well for once, so I said I'd go. Not like I'm doing much else,” he added in a lower voice.

“You're not going to college?” said Johnny, a little surprised.

Daniel shrugged, not looking too concerned. “I figure I can always go later. Don't really have the cash right now, anyway. As evidenced by....” and he gestured around the car.

“Man, it's like every single person I know started college this month. Got kinda sick of hearing about it,” said Johnny.

“Right? Like – there's more to life than school. More to learn than what you can read in a book – you know I tried to teach myself karate out of a book?” And when Johnny made a noise, he added, “Yeah, yeah, rich boy, laugh it up. Not like I thought I had a lot of choices.”

“Nerdiest shit I ever heard,” said Johnny, but he didn't want to talk about karate.

Daniel seemed to sense this, because he said casually, “For example, I learned this morning that taking rides from older dudes who keep commenting on how young you are is a bad idea.”

Johnny wrinkled his nose. “Oh, dude.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you jump out of the car or something?”

“I waited for him to stop and get gas and then walked away.”

Johnny stared hard out at the road for a bit, something uncomfortable shifting in his gut. He hadn't eaten yet today, so it was probably the hangover. But also—

“If it came to it, do you even know how to punch out a jugular?” he asked. He didn't think Daniel looked like a little kid, but he was – *pretty*, for lack of a less faggy word. And his style of fighting was so heavy on the defense, it didn't do much in situations where the assailant was like, biding his time.

Daniel chewed on his lip a moment before sliding a look at him around his sunglasses. “Punch out a jugular? Really, you know how to do that?”

“Theoretically.”

“Man, your sensei was *sick*.”

Johnny's mouth tightened. He couldn't argue with that. “Yeah.”

He switched on the radio and turned the volume up, and they drove on deeper into the Mojave.

“What were you doing out this way, anyway?” asked Daniel at some

point miles on.

After graduation, Johnny took to driving around at night. He started small – just down to the beach or up the coast. But then his radius gradually increased, until he was spending half the night cruising the highways: beer between his legs, wind stinging his eyes, thrum of the engine beneath him. So long as he was driving, he could tell himself he was going somewhere.

“I was camping.”

“Camping.” Was there anything LaRusso wasn't suspicious about? “Where's your tent?”

“It's the desert, who needs a tent to camp?”

“Sleeping bag, then. Flashlight? Did you bring anything other than your,” and here he abruptly rose up onto his knees and bent over the seat to looked around the back, “...eight beers and a jerky stick?”

“I like to go minimalist,” said Johnny, glancing at the drape of his body over the passenger seat. “Real men don't need a lot of gear to survive the wilderness.”

Daniel wiggled back around and slouched down again in the seat. He sure took up a lot of space for a little guy.

“Yeah, yeah, you'd like. Punch out a coyote if it looked at you funny.”

“Think of how badass that would look,” said Johnny without thinking.

To his surprise, Daniel grinned. “And if you need water, you could always karate chop a cactus.”

“Now you're getting it. Who needs supplies?”

He hesitated. “Actually – I'm pretty starved, man.”

“Yeah,” admitted Johnny. “Me too.” His stomach had been protesting for the past forty miles. He checked his mirrors, squinted at the road, and said, “Hey, look, what's the hurry? Flagstaff's not that far. We can stop and eat. I mean, if you want.”

Daniel's expression was hard to read with the sunglasses, but he agreed readily enough.

Ludlow to Amboy

It was half past two in the afternoon when they pulled up to Amboy and the retro cafe and motel combo deal sitting by the roadside.

“Seriously?” said Daniel as Johnny cut the engine.

He glanced over. “What?”

“This is some kind of tourist trap.”

“It's like, classic, or whatever,” he said, nonplussed. “Been here forever, by the looks of it.”

“All that means is it's a tourist trap with bad amenities.”

“What are you, an old lady? You sound like my stepdad's mother.”

And Johnny put his hand on the door handle, ready to get on with it, but Daniel wasn't done; Daniel was pushing his sunglasses up on his head and gesturing with both hands and saying:

“I'm serious. Kinda place like this, you go inside, they seat you at some rinky-dink old booth with cracked seats that people think look charming but were just the only thing available for cheap this far out in the middle of nowhere forty years ago. There won't be any A/C, and the ice machine only works on Tuesdays and the odd Thursday. They'll make you the same sad club sandwich you could get at any diner off the Interstate and then charge you six bucks for the experience.”

Johnny could only stare. “Did you just pick a fight with... the *idea* of this place?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Fine, let's just go in. You'll see.” And he hopped out of the Avanti, climbing over the side and not minding the paint job.

“You know, for a guy who was thumbing down strangers a couple hours ago, you're kinda picky,” said Johnny as he followed him to the door of the cafe.

It was cooler inside, but just barely. An oscillating fan sat on the counter, ribbon flying from the grate to prove it was on; Daniel looked at it and then sent him a significant look. Johnny shook his head and

said nothing. Jesus.

An older man with a salt and pepper beard came down the length of the counter towards them. They both unconsciously straightened up like they'd been caught doing something wrong.

“Hello, boys. Doing the Old 66? Buddy road trip?”

“Just driving around,” mumbled Johnny, because it was weird to him that anyone would look at them and assume they were friends. Daniel's response overlapped his, an awkward, too-fast:

“ – just giving me a lift, yeah.”

The man nodded, clearly not really giving a shit and why would he. “Right, well – sit wherever you like, menus are on the tables. I'll be over in a few to take your order.”

They looked around at the counter stools and the scattering of two-person tables. Sitting at the counter meant making small talk with the cafe guy, so that was out. And something in Johnny instinctively didn't like the idea of sitting across a table out in the open with LaRusso. Booths it was; he hurriedly stepped past him to pick a booth along the window overlooking the road.

Booths said nothing about their occupants one way or another. If a diner floor was rated on intimacy, booths were the dead middle. The California Angels of seating arrangements.

They slid into the booth. The seat, Johnny noticed with outsized triumph, was in perfectly fine condition.

“Man, I could eat a whole cow,” said Daniel, grabbing one of the menus.

“Think that guy'd give me a beer?” asked Johnny, craning his neck to look behind the counter.

Daniel looked like he was considering saying something – something that would make Johnny want to punch him – but at the last second his expression shifted and he said, “Do I get to drive the convertible if he does?”

“LaRusso,” he said seriously, “the only way you're getting behind the wheel of that car is if I'm unconscious. And even then, I'm pretty sure I'd wake up just to stop you.”

They ate and it was weird mostly for how not-weird it felt. If Johnny had to guess, which he didn't because that would mean thinking about it, he figured – it was hard to worry about chit-chat or social niceties when you'd fucked up a guy's leg and then he kicked you in the face and ended your karate career. They stole to third base with the tournament, in terms of being able to talk straight with one another.

And Daniel talked a lot. Constantly. Johnny took huge bites out of his burger and chewed and stared him down, and he just kept *talking*. No wonder Ali dumped him. Probably couldn't get a word in during Prom.

(Johnny, in comparison, had always let her talk as long as she wanted. He found it easier to nod along and listen instead of worrying about coming up with some showy line in response.)

He was picking over the last of his fries, these limp crinkle-cut things that made him think about what Daniel had said earlier about the Interstate diners, when Daniel said:

“Hey, uh – I think those guys might be messing with your car, man.”

Johnny's head came up and in the next second he had vacated the booth, shoes skidding over the cafe linoleum as he dashed to the door.

The late afternoon desert air hit him like a wave as he pushed out of the cafe. He sprinted towards the Avanti and the two guys standing on either side: their grubby hands smoothing over her flanks, heads nodding and mouths moving like they had any idea what they were touching.

“Hey, hey! What are you doing? Get off my fucking car!”

The hands came off and the feet went back, but the men didn't retreat further than that, especially once they saw him. They were older, and he could tell the moment they looked him over and realized it. A certain twist to the face, he was used to the look, that dumb think-they-know-something fucking look. *This car? This punk ass kid? No. That's not right.*

“Take it easy, kid,” said the one on the right. “We were just looking at it.”

He slowed and stopped level with her hood. He kept his hands relaxed like he'd been taught and said, “Well, you can look a few feet back.”

“Worried we're going to scratch it and Daddy's gonna be mad?” said the other one, and yeah, that's how he figured it was going to go.

Johnny's stance shifted, a small difference if you didn't know what to look for. But before he could start forward, a loud, mouthy voice called out:

“Hey, I think the cafe owner called the cops!”

Which took care of the two interlopers quick enough. Johnny stayed tense as he watched them back off to their own truck several spaces away, not looking away until they'd climbed in and pulled out. Then he turned to Daniel, who was still standing halfway of the distance to the cafe doors.

“No, I'm serious,” said Daniel after a second, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “We need to pay for the meal, or he says he's gonna call the cops.”

The only thing that betrayed him was the small smug grin he couldn't stifle.

Amboy to Goffs

“So,” said Daniel. “You been to Flagstaff before?”

He kept doing this distracting thing with his right hand, putting it out of the car and letting it skim up and down like it was surfing the air currents.

“Never been outside California,” he replied without thinking. Then bit back a curse, because—

“What, *never*?” Daniel actually turned on the seat.

—because people always reacted the same stupid way.

“But. You're rich,” he continued, disbelief and something almost like suspicion in his tone, like he thought Johnny might be lying about this for some reason.

“What's that got to do with anything? Look, my stepdad's a real homebody, alright. The man breaks out in hives if he has to go to Riverside.”

“But you got this car. You're telling me you never popped over the border, didn't hit up Vegas when you turned 18? Nothing?”

“I've had a fake ID since I was fifteen, what do I need to go to Vegas for.”

“Not the point.”

“California's a big state, not a lot of reasons to leave. This isn't like if someone had never left, say, *New Jersey*.”

The other boy shook his head. He pulled legs up onto the seat absently. “Man. You've never left California.”

“It's like four states in one just by itself,” he insisted.

“It really isn't,” said Daniel. “I'm telling you, you can like, sense it in the air soon as you cross the state line. Don't matter if you're in the valley or – Redding, or whatever.”

“Oh, and you've been to Redding?” Skeptical.

“Yeah, sure. I've been to lots of places. Just this summer I went to—” and then he stopped talking, so abruptly Johnny would've thought the wind snatched him up out of the car if he wasn't still sitting there like a lump on his seat.

Johnny glanced at him; his expression had darkened.

“What's with you?” he said.

“Nothing.”

Johnny waited a beat and then said, annoyed, “Well, where'd you go this summer?”

“Okinawa,” said Daniel shortly, and he wouldn't say anymore, not even to tell Johnny where the fuck Okinawa was.

The next road sign he saw for Flagstaff said 270 miles, and something in Johnny sank a little.

He used to collect road maps – grabbing the free ones meant for tourists that sat just inside hotel lobbies, stealing the odd one from a gas station, and one time raiding the collection of a Triple-A office while his mom was getting her membership sorted. He liked unfolding them and spreading them out on the floor, making secret getaway plans in his head by tracing the roads that ran from Los Angeles, and there were so many.

So he knew, theoretically, that Flagstaff was a short enough distance to do in one day, even one afternoon. But he hadn't really thought about it. When he first threw it out there, it was only because it was the next decent-sized city to the east.

It's not that he even liked spending all this time with LaRusso. But it was different from what he'd been doing, and that was good enough.

Johnny flexed his hands over the steering wheel. His eyes flicked down to his dash.

It was almost five, and the sun was comfortably at their backs, painting the desert ahead in growing purples and reds. The I-40 was coming up. It bypassed 66 until Needles or thereabouts, but the distances probably weren't all that different. And the guy back at the

diner had poked something in his brain. Just – doing the Old 66. It was an idea.

The intersection with I-40 at Fenner came and went. Johnny drove on, and LaRusso was too sunk into his weird sulk to notice.

But he sure noticed when the car kicked up a protest and started to slow; he sat bolt upright and looked around. “What's going on? Why're you stopping?”

Johnny stared down at his gauges. “Fuck, *fuck*.” He started turning the wheel, urging the car to the side of the road in its last desperate gasps.

“What, what is it?”

The car died, and they were left with nothing but the sound of the wind coming down off the barren hills and the ticking sound of the Avanti's cooling engine.

“What the fuck?” said Daniel.

Johnny hit his steering wheel like he was frustrated and turned his head to stare out the window. He brought a fist up against mouth for cover and said:

“We're out of gas.”

Goffs

Johnny's been accused of being a little impulsive in the past, and he guessed maybe those people had a point because it takes all of five minutes for him to regret this plan. Five minutes is a long time to be stuck in the middle of nowhere with Daniel LaRusso's bitching. Maybe Johnny had heat stroke, to think this had ever been a good idea. Jesus.

“You should get out of the road,” said Johnny, leaning against the Avanti and watching. Daniel stood straddling the faded center line and stared back the way they came. “Or don't, whatever. If you get hit by a truck or something, at least it'll be quiet again.”

“How are you taking this so well?” demanded Daniel.

He shrugged. “Freaking out's not going to change anything.”

“Yeah, well. We'll see if you're still so calm when we start to go weak from dehydration.”

“Real men don't go weak just because they get a little thirsty. But if you're so worried, you can relax, LaRusso, because I bought water at the last gas station.”

“Yeah, pity you didn't buy more *gas*.” Daniel shook his head and turned in place, scanning the horizon. After a couple seconds, his face cleared and he started walking.

“Where're you going?” called Johnny, annoyed.

“I think there's some buildings in the distance. Maybe we're near a town.”

“But what about my car? We can't just leave her here.”

Daniel switched to walking backwards, throwing his arms out and making his usual big show of being a little prick. “Who's asking you to come along?” he shouted. And then he resumed walking normally and didn't look back again.

Johnny cursed. He spent a minute getting the top up – figuring the car would look like less of a target if it wasn't left open, exposed – and then jogged to catch up with the other boy.

The buildings turned out to be a ghost town.

“Oh, you gotta be kidding me.” Daniel stopped and stared up at the wind-torn shell of what looked like some kind of general store. Half the siding was gone and most of the windows were broken. The place looked like it was slowly bleaching out, becoming one with the desert again, like the bones of a dead animal lying in the sun.

“I don't think they have any gas,” said Johnny. He'd taken his shirt off by then and wrapped it around his head, and it still wasn't doing much to protect him. When he touched his face, it was tight and hot, and he figured he must look like a tomato about to split its skin. He felt a little strange: untethered, like he might float away if the wind blew too hard.

Daniel stepped up to peer through the broken windows and then looked back at the desolate, cracked road. “Are we even on 66 anymore? Did you take a wrong turn or something?”

And yeah, Johnny was starting to suspect he hadn't remembered the map as well as he'd thought he did. But he wasn't about to admit that to him. “Don't blame me for this. I didn't put it here.”

“What do you mean, don't blame you? You were the one driving!”

“Exactly, LaRusso. *I* was driving *you*. Out of the goodness of my heart, I was giving you a ride—”

“Goodness of your heart, bullshit—”

“While you just sat there doing nothing.”

Daniel stepped closer, eyes going hot and hard. “What was I supposed to be doing exactly? You want me to hold your hand? Pat the sweat from your forehead?”

It should've been impossible to feel the flush on his face beneath the sunburn, but somehow Johnny knew it was there anyway. “Don't you know it's always shotgun who navigates? Moron.”

“You don't have a map in the car,” he snapped.

“Second set of eyes, man. Maybe I wouldn't have missed the turn if you'd been paying attention.”

“It's the desert, what's there to look at?”

“Hm, I don't know – a fucking road sign?”

“Are you finally admitting you can't read, Johnny?”

He lunged forward. Daniel evaded his blow easily, and Johnny stumbled and fell to his knees. His head was killing him, and when he tried to push back up, he lost his balance and fell again. What the hell.

“Hey.” He looked up, blinking. Daniel was staring down at him with a mixture of annoyance and concern, annoyed about being concerned, probably. His brow pinched. “You don't look so good, man. Do you think you have like, heat stroke or something?”

Maybe Johnny should have drank more water. Maybe he should've not driven with the top down all day after waking up hungover and then capped it off with a hike through the desert with the world's most annoying guy. "I don't have heat stroke. I'm just a little. Hot, is all."

Daniel sighed and ran a hand back through his hair. “Look, why don't you sit over there under the shade, and I'll uh, I'll run back to the car. Get the water.”

Johnny shook his head. He took a breath and pushed back up to his feet. “I'm coming with you.”

That look again, like Daniel was counting in his head. “That kind of defeats the purpose—”

“You're not leaving me here. Knowing you, someone'll come by with gas and you'll drive off with my car.”

“Johnny,” he said, exasperated.

“Also, this place gives me the fucking creeps.” Amusement flickered over Daniel's face. “Oh, shut up. It creeps you out too, admit it.”

Daniel looked around the scattering of dead buildings. “Yeah, okay. It really does. Feels like a ghost of a cowboy is going to come around the corner any minute.” He took a few uncertain steps backwards and watched Johnny follow. “You good? Do you need – help, or whatever?”

“I'm fine,” he snapped and then stumbled a little, because walking and talking were apparently no longer things he could multitask on. There

was an old joke somewhere in there.

Daniel visibly lost what little patience he still had and grabbed Johnny's arm, hauling it around his shoulder and bearing him up.

“Look, we'll do this and never talk about it again, alright,” said Daniel. He somehow felt cool to the touch, and Johnny fought back a shiver.

He gritted his teeth. “Deal.”

On the Side of a Road with No Name

“How many miles from the last town we passed, do you think?” asked Daniel. It was a couple hours later, and aside from one car that did not even bother slowing down as it sped past them, there had been no traffic.

Johnny was on the ground, stretched below a makeshift tent for his head he made from some sticks and a plaid shirt he found in his trunk. He still felt a little queasy and didn't move as he replied, “Don't know. Maybe – ten miles?”

“That's not so bad. That's doable.”

“Yeah, we'll have to try that tomorrow morning if no one stops.”

“Why don't I just go now?” said Daniel.

Johnny sighed and slid out from under his shelter. He squinted at the other boy. “Uh, because it's getting dark? And because even if you don't wander off the road and get lost, you'd probably get hit by a car?” And because Johnny was in no shape to go with him, and he definitely thought there was a chance Daniel would just grab another ride and let him rot out here by himself.

Daniel didn't exactly look convinced by his (perfectly good) arguments, but after a strange moment of indecisive glancing at Johnny, he threw his hands up. “Okay, fine. Tomorrow. I'm sure we'll be awake come dawn anyway.”

Johnny nodded at the Avanti. “How much water we got left?”

Daniel walked over and looked in the back seat and then went around to check the trunk. “Half the small one, and then a gallon in the trunk.”

“Can't drink the gallon,” said Johnny automatically.

Daniel turned and stared at him. “Why the hell not?”

“That's for the radiator, in case the engine overheats.”

“Don't think that'll be an issue,” he said slowly; tone insulting, “since the engine is currently dead. And we can always buy another gallon later on.”

“Okay, but I'm just saying – I've had that gallon a while. Like, at least a year.” He had no idea if water could go bad.

“Can water go bad?” wondered Daniel aloud.

When it got dark, they put the top down again on the Avanti and each took possession of half the car – Johnny in the front, Daniel in the back. They split the remaining gas station spoils for dinner, passing pretzels and beef jerky over the top of the seat. They discussed the possibilities of hunting lizard for long enough that Johnny began to suspect he was not the only one who'd flirted with heat exhaustion that afternoon.

Meanwhile, the sun sank behind the western hills, and the sky deepened and deepened overhead until—

“Holy shit,” said Johnny, and after a moment he realized Daniel had said it at the same time.

There was no end to them: that was all Johnny could think as he put his head back against the door and stared up at the stars.

Every new patch seemed to have more and more the longer he looked at it, and if he'd been drinking, he would've assumed that's why they seemed to blur a little – but now he thought: that just how many there were. So many they ran together. So many they seemed to collide and in colliding, danced.

They hadn't spoken for a good fifteen minutes when Daniel asked:

“You know any constellations?”

“Nope. You?”

“The Big Dipper, I guess. But that's about it.”

“That doesn't even count. Everyone knows that one.”

And then they were silent again, because somehow it felt stupid to argue and bitch when the stars were watching.

They eventually dragged the top back up, because it didn't take long for the temperature to start to drop off once the sun was gone. Conversation died a natural death, and Johnny curled up on his side and slept.

He awoke sometime in the middle of the night, clutching his elbows and shivering. "*Fuck*."

He was never driving across the country without alcohol in the car again, he vowed then and there.

"You awake, man?" came Daniel's voice from the back. Reedy, thin. He wasn't having a great time of it either.

Johnny scowled into the dark footwell. "...Yeah," he gritted out after a moment.

"S'cold, right?"

"Yeah."

"Sure you don't have any hidden blankets in this thing?"

"Yeah."

"Damnit."

"Yeah."

And then they said no more, but Johnny didn't think either of them really slept after that.

The night seemed to last forever. It was a strange time: drifting fitfully in the darkness, never quite asleep, never quite alone. At least a dozen times, he thought about saying something to LaRusso; when he briefly dipped into dreaming sleep, he was sure he did. Or maybe he was awake, and those conversations were real. The line was blurry. He didn't know the difference, and part of him didn't want to know.

Fenner to Needles

Johnny awoke to a stranger's cheerful voice asking if they needed some help, and Daniel replying eagerly in the affirmative. And before he could sit up to scope out the situation, make sure Daniel wasn't about to get them both abducted by a creep, the other boy was reaching through the window and putting a hand to his chest, shaking him roughly.

“Johnny. Johnny, man, wake up. This guy says he can give us a ride back to Fenner for gas.”

He batted his hands away and sat up with a slight groan. He squinted against the dawn light over to the blue pick-up idling ten feet away. Daniel was practically dancing in place with his impatience to get going. It was a lot to deal with in the first thirty seconds of consciousness.

“Okay,” he said, and gave himself another five seconds to just sit and feel. “Okay.”

They sat back in the bed of the truck: backs against the cab, arms hanging off the sides, and knees up to brace against the bump and jostle of the road. Daniel kept turning his head to peer around the front at the road, like he doubted Fenner would appear unless he was looking for it.

Johnny watched the Avanti grow smaller and smaller until they climbed over a hill and it disappeared altogether.

“You're quiet,” said Daniel.

Johnny shrugged. He wasn't much of a morning person, so sue him.

“Should hit Flagstaff in a few hours, what do you think?”

Johnny dug his thumb in the top of the truck bed and scraped absently at a spot where the paint had worn off, revealing bare metal. Exposed to all the elements. “Yeah.”

It didn't take Daniel long to give up on conversation, and they rode the rest of the way into Fenner in silence.

All told it was barely more than half an hour before they were back with a gas can and Johnny could relax again. He filled the Avanti up while Daniel uttered some more profuse *thank you so much* and *you really saved our bacon, man*. He was laying it on real thick.

“Just hate to see such a fine piece of machinery out of commission,” said the guy, and Johnny finally had to glance up with a faint smile.

The sound of her engine starting up clean and loud was the sweetest music he'd ever heard. Johnny mentally promised never to betray her by doing something so stupid ever again.

They waved the man off with another round of thanks and then looked at each other over the rumbling car. The sun was solidly up in the sky by then, and the heat was rising again.

“So, what do you say,” said Daniel. “Return the gas can, fill her up, and then we find the right road?”

Johnny hopped in behind the wheel. “So long as you're actually looking this time, LaRusso, anything's possible.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, but he was grinning a little as he climbed into the passenger seat. His hand shot out for purchase as Johnny gunned the engine and whipped the car around in a tight circle, spraying dirt and gravel.

Daniel said, “Take it easy, that was only a two-gallon can. What kind of mileage does this thing even get, anyway?”

“You'd prefer to ride to Flagstaff in a Dodge Omni? No? Then shut up.”

The second drive to Fenner was much more fun.

In Needles they stopped and got breakfast at a McDonald's. They sat in the air-conditioned building and practically inhaled the food. Johnny has had probably a thousand egg mcmuffins before, but he thought this one maybe the best meal he'd ever had in his life.

“So. You feeling nervous yet?” asked Daniel, wrapping his lips around the straw of his soda.

He squinted at him. “Nervous about what?” he asked, turning to his second sandwich.

“Crossing the state line. This'll be the furthest you've ever been from the Shire, Samwise.”

Johnny balled the wrapper of his first mcmuffin up and threw it at him; Daniel dodged. “You're such a nerd.”

“Hey, you recognized the reference.”

“No, I didn't. I'm just guessing it's nerd stuff because *you* said it.” Then he thought about what he'd said and added, “And this isn't the furthest I've been from home, I told you. California's like four states in one.”

“Whatever.”

But later, when it was time to get back in the car and Johnny was looking east, he could admit to himself it did feel a little weird – that he was finally leaving the state, and that he was doing it with Daniel LaRusso of all people. First time for everything, and it didn't have to mean anything. But somehow – somehow it did, anyway.

Needles to Antares

So far, Arizona looked a lot like California: sun and sand and two-lane blacktop. Except for the change in speed limit, which Johnny was ignoring anyway, it felt basically the same. He knew Daniel was full of shit.

He drove for a while in silence until he could no longer ignore what was happening on the other side of the car; the breaking point was when Daniel's fingers came within a few inches of Johnny's eyes and he nearly swerved off the road.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

Daniel gave him a funny look, like he was the weirdo in this situation. “Stretching, what's it look like?” And then he twisted his shoulders away.

“I can see that, I just don't understand *why*.”

“We just slept in a car, man. I'm surprised you don't need to stretch.”

“I've slept in the car before, never had any problems.” He wasn't going to get offended on the Avanti's behalf because he wasn't insane. It was probably only, Daniel wasn't a natural athlete like him. He didn't have the years of conditioning. Of course he'd be stiff from one measly night curled up on a car seat, even if that car seat with the perfect balance of give and firm and covered in leather softer than butter.

He untwisted and went the other direction, now facing Johnny. “And why is that, exactly?”

Johnny shifted on the seat. He put his elbow up on the door and stared at the road. “Why what?”

“Sleeping in your car. How often do you do that? I mean, what's your deal?”

“I don't have a deal.”

“Okay, don't want to talk about it? We don't have to talk about it.”

“Jesus.” He lasted three more seconds and said, “Hey, if you're gonna do that, could you maybe do it in the back so I don't drive us off the road? It's like have a dancing monkey on the seat next to me.”

Daniel shrugged and smoothly rolled over the seat into the back. It turned out that was worse, because Johnny kept finding his gaze drawn to the rear view mirror; it felt safer to look in this indirect way, but that, he knew, was a lie. False sense of security. And yet—

“I drive around a lot, is all,” he said, tossing the words over his shoulder like litter. “And sometimes it's easier to just pull over and sleep in the car than go all the way back to my stepdad's place.”

Daniel's forearms press down on the seat next to Johnny's shoulder as he leaned forward. When Johnny stole a quick glance, he saw the other boy had his eyes narrowed against the slipstream of air flowing over the windshield of the car. He was chewing his lip, thoughtful.

“What do you do, when you're driving?” asked Daniel. It was weird having his voice so close, coming from behind like a sneak attack.

“What do you mean? Nothing. I just – drive.”

“Yeah, but like – alone? You don't have one of the other guys with you, or a, a girl, or something?”

“Of course, sometimes.” They never wanted to stay out as long, though. At some point in the night, he always ended up dropping the others off. “But sometimes – not.”

“Is your stepdad a jerk?” asked Daniel suddenly.

“Why do you say that?”

“You always call him stepdad, for one. And, I dunno, just something about the way you talk about it, and how yesterday you said you were avoiding home—”

“Yeah,” interrupted Johnny, already reaching for the radio dial. “He's kind of a dick. But big deal, so are a lot of people, right?”

“Right,” muttered Daniel, and then the pressure on the seat cushion let up and he went back to stretching.

“So, explain something I don't get,” said Johnny, later, after Daniel had returned to the front.

Daniel rolled his head along the headrest. He looked bored out of his

mind. “That could take a long time. Think we'll hit Flagstaff before I finish?”

“Yeah, ha ha,” he said. "Jackass."

Daniel's mouth quirked and he spread his hands, like *yeah, I try*. His grin faded as Johnny continued:

“How the hell was your mom okay with you hitchhiking across the country?” Because Johnny remembered the woman in the stands at the All Valley tournament, the way she'd looked so terrified for her son. His own mom used to look like that, before she stopped coming to the matches because they were *too stressful*.

He thought maybe Daniel wouldn't answer, but before he could bother him about it – fair's fucking fair, man – he said, “She uh, she doesn't know. She thinks Mr. Miyagi's driving me.”

“Your sensei?” Johnny thought about that for a second. “Well, why isn't he?”

“He's not... currently in the country, let's say.” And then he rushed on before Johnny could process that, “And I knew if my ma *knew* that, she wouldn't be cool with me not moving to Fresno with her, so basically – I'm just trying to figure out what to do. I just need some time.”

“Yeah.” He got that part, at least.

He glanced at Daniel, and the other boy met his eyes immediately. They both looked away, because it was one thing to share some of the bullshit bothering them, and a whole other thing to acknowledge that was what they were doing.

Antares to Ash Fork

Ever since they left California in the rear view, Daniel kept doing this annoying thing every thirty miles or so where he'd startle and then lean over from the other seat into Johnny's space. He'd give him a suspicious look, refusing to lean away to maintain distance because it felt obscurely like losing; Daniel always simply shrugged and fell back into his seat. They did this twice before Johnny realized what he was doing.

“Quit that. We're not going to run out of gas again, alright?”

“Doesn't hurt to have two sets of eyes, you said it yourself.”

“That was for directions,” said Johnny, hands flexing around the wheel: the only tell he allowed himself. “You're in shotgun, that makes you the navigator. As the operator of this vehicle, I'm in charge of the dashboard. If there's a problem with one of them, I'll let you know. So back off.”

“You're certifiable, you know that?” But Daniel flapped his hand at him like he was over it and settled against the door, eyes returning to the passing landscape.

It was going to be weird, driving back this way without him.

In Ash Fork, there was a Texaco station with a 1960s Chrysler DeSoto parked atop the roof. A sign informed them it was once driven by Elvis Presley, so Johnny stopped, even though they still had a quarter tank. Daniel did not complain, though surely he had another Gettysburg Address about tourist traps waiting on the tip of his tongue.

The fill-up station was half gift shop, and Johnny left Daniel mindlessly spinning a rack of postcards to step over to a payphone and call home. It was half-past two and his mom would be out, Sid working.

It rang eight times and the answering machine clicked on. Johnny withstood the sound of Sid's voice, fingers tapping impatiently against his leg until the tone, and then he put on his most normal voice and

said:

Hey Mom, it's me. Sorry about not calling before – I was up at Bobby's cabin and the power went out on us. It's all good now. Should be back in a couple days to get my stuff, just didn't want you to worry. Okay, uh – gotta go. Bobby's parents complain about long distance calls, you know how they are. Um, bye.

When he turned around, Daniel was only a couple feet away, frozen in place and staring at him. He had a pair of gift shop sunglasses perched on his nose; each lens was shaped like a six, and they looked stupid.

“You look really stupid,” said Johnny. His heart was beating a little fast.

“What'd you mean, 'get your stuff'?” asked Daniel.

“Really, really stupid,” he said again and brushed past him to check out the T-shirts, because he'd been wearing the same clothing for three days and the smell was starting to bother even him.

He bought the least dumb shirt he could find, which was a tough call. The one he ended up with was done up like the Arizona state flag, the bottom half a plain blue, a star on the chest and red and gold beams stretching over the shoulders. He felt like a discount comic book hero, but whatever. It wasn't like anyone who mattered could see him.

Daniel came out of the shop as he was stripping off his old shirt, and his expression was quiet and watchful. Johnny felt unbearably exposed in more ways than one and made quick work of hauling the fresh shirt on; the stiff new cotton scraped over the slight sunburn on his shoulders from the previous afternoon. He gritted his teeth and threw the old shirt into his trunk with great prejudice.

“Ready?” he barked, rounding the car to the driver's side.

“Yeah,” said Daniel, subdued. And then: “Uh, here, by the way.” And he tossed something over the car. Johnny caught it out of the air automatically.

He blinked down at the tube of sunscreen. His eyebrows knitted.

“Pasty guy like you, don't know how you don't already have some in

the car," said Daniel, tone much more normal. He avoided Johnny's blank stare and got in the passenger side. After a moment of thinking, he leaned over and checked the dashboard; Johnny got in behind the wheel and shoved his shoulder back.

"Already filled up the tank," he said gruffly.

Daniel waved a hand. "Oh, so you can take care of the car, but not yourself."

"Keep going and I'll make you eat the sunscreen. Try me, man. Go ahead."

Ash Fork to Flagstaff

And just like that, they were less than fifty miles from Flagstaff and the end of the road. Well – end of the road for Johnny, anyway.

Civilization didn't return without indicators heralding its arrival; the emptiness they'd been driving through gradually filled in with more frequent gas stations, restaurants, and motels. Billboards for places they would never stay, sights they'd never see. The traffic picked up as well, everybody else with some place they had to be.

Just outside Williams, a large black Lincoln sedan passed them at high speed.

Daniel glanced at Johnny and let out a slight laugh. “Your face, man. You're almost offended.”

Johnny pointed at the sedan now speeding into the distance ahead. “Guy came right up on my tail and hung there for a couple minutes and then whipped into the other lane like he was making a point. He was looking to offend.”

“By all means, lets read malice and aforethought into the random actions of passing strangers.”

Johnny didn't know what that phrase meant, but he could guess from the context. “You ever see Road Warrior? You can't trust other people on the road, there's no telling what they'll do.”

“And here's where I point out that was a movie,” said Daniel slowly, shaping his words with a deliberate emphasis, like people did when they thought Johnny was being dumb. “Not real. I think if people were constantly hijacking each other's cars and shooting each other for gas, we'd hear about it.”

“Movies can be instructive,” he muttered. And anyway, wasn't that basically what the oil crisis ten years back was like? “The road is a dangerous place – I mean, look at you. You almost got abducted by a perv.”

Daniel shifted on his seat, looking harried. “We don't know that. The guy probably wasn't going to do anything, he just – gave off weird vibes.”

Vibes. What a stupid thing to coast on; Johnny thought it was much better to treat everyone with suspicion and wait until you were proven wrong.

They passed another road sign, and his eyes automatically went to the number next to Flagstaff.

“You done this before? You said you travel a lot,” he clarified, at Daniel's curious look. “So like, you've hitchhiked before? You know what you're doing.”

“Yeah, 'course,” said Daniel. “Used to hitchhike into the City all the time when I didn't have money for fare.”

“All the time?” he said skeptically, because Daniel had been seventeen when he moved to Reseda, and he had to think most of that tough east coast talk was mostly bullshit.

“A couple times, anyway.” Daniel drummed his fingers along the edge of the window and chewed his lip. He slid another look Johnny's way. “So, you – gonna go back the same way?”

Johnny didn't particularly want to think about it. He stared at the road and said, “Yeah, maybe.”

“It's just – probably for the best, y'know, since you'd probably get lost and like, die of starvation out in the desert somewhere. Without a navigator, I mean.”

His eyes narrowed. “I'll be just fine. I drive around all the time.” From the corner of his eye, he saw Daniel's hand lift like, *yeah, okay.*

They fell silent again until they hit the outskirts of Flagstaff.

Flagstaff

There was a 24-hr travel plaza where 17 met 40, and Johnny figured that was as good a place as any to find a ride; Daniel agreed. They rolled into the lot and parked clear of all traffic and trucks, because Johnny didn't want to risk his car getting dinged. Turning off her engine felt strangely final, and he didn't think it was his imagination that Daniel felt it too. He wasn't really looking at Johnny, and his eyebrows were lowered in thought.

They both looked out across the lot to the milling traffic. The sounds of trucks gasping and engines idling was surprisingly loud, even at a distance. So idyllic.

“So how does this even work,” said Johnny, waving a hand. “Do you just – go up to people, put on your whole innocent kid routine and ask them for a ride?”

“I don't have an innocent kid routine,” said Daniel, which was probably the most hilarious thing he'd said since they met up in Victorville.

“Oh, *please*. You kidding?” Johnny leaned forward and made his eyes real wide and pitched his voice. “Yo, I'm from Jersey and I know how ta sweet-talk chicks and charm old ladies. Something goes wrong, don't look at me, 'cause it ain't never my fault.”

Daniel stared. “Was that supposed to be *me*?”

“Who else?”

“You sounded like a henchman in a B-movie gangster flick on a Sunday afternoon.”

Johnny shrugged. “My point stands. So – that what you gonna do?”

“I'll probably leave off the part about sweet-talking chicks, but – yeah,” Daniel looked back over to the gas pumps. “I guess I'll go and ask around. Maybe pick a family or something?”

Then he got out. The only thing to do was for Johnny to get out too. He moved to the front of the Avanti and leaned back on the hood, feeling the warmth of the metal and taking some comfort from it. Flagstaff was at elevation, surrounded by mountains, and it was

surprisingly cooler than the desert had been earlier in the day.

Daniel hauled his bag out from the back seat and dropped it carelessly on the ground; bending to rifle through it; double-checking for all his stuff. Johnny couldn't see his expression.

He looked around at the travel plaza again, scoping out all the cars and trucks. Wondering which might be the one to take Daniel on.

“You know they're decommissioning it?” he said abruptly.

The other boy looked up from his bag, blinking. “What?”

“Route 66. They're removing it from the map after this year. It's been mostly replaced with the Interstate, so.” He shrugged and squinted up at the sun. “This is probably the last chance to see it.”

Daniel stood, eyes flicking away and back. Unreadable. “Interstate's faster anyway,” he said, but his tone was hesitant, questioning.

“Yeah. But there's less to see. All the exits look the same.”

He nodded slowly. “I guess a bunch of small towns are gonna die. Bypassed and all.”

It was the story of the west: places cropping up and disappearing, people always moving on to better things. Johnny thought of Goffs and the general store they saw there, wondered who was the last person to shut the door on the place and walk away – if they'd known it was the last time when they did it.

Do you ever know when the last time is the last time? Or does it come on too slow, the distractions too great and too many. Johnny hadn't seen any of his friends in three weeks, not since they started college. And Daniel was crossing the country back to Jersey; maybe he'd get a job and stay there. Who was to say what anyone would do in the future. Not him.

“Yeah,” said Johnny belatedly. He put his hands in his jeans pockets and looked down.

Daniel took a breath and said, “You know, I uh – I don't have to be in Parsippany until the end of the week. My cousin's handling it until then.” He stared at Johnny, who stared back, not getting it. He rolled his eyes. “So, if I wanted to take the slower route, this Route 66....” and he raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

Johnny straightened up off the Avanti's hood, hands coming out of his pockets. “You asking me for a ride to Chicago, LaRusso?”

His lips thinned. “Hey, so you seem bored out of your skull anyway. And you were the one who's never been anywhere, you been going on about the tragic decline of the Mother Road and all that crap—”

“Okay.”

Daniel paused, checking his expression. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” His heart was beating fast. It took a lot of effort to bite back his grin. “Let's do it, let's do Route 66. Flagstaff to the Windy City, man. It should only take us, what, a couple days? No big deal.”

“Yeah. Yeah, no big deal.” Daniel looked back at his bag on the ground. Something about his shoulders was suddenly much more relaxed; Johnny supposed he was relieved not have to go around hoping some apple pie minivan type took pity on him. “Alright. Well, let's gas up and get back on the road—”

“Hold up,” said Johnny, putting a hand up to his shoulder to stop him before he got carried away. Daniel looked back at him. “Trucker showers, man. We both reek, and the Avanti's seats deserve better.”

“I'm going to regret this whole thing, aren't I,” said Daniel ominously.

Johnny finally lost the reins to his smile; he turned around and started towards the travel plaza so it was at least directed in a safe direction. He called over his shoulder:

“Yeah, probably.”

Flagstaff to Barringer Crater

It felt good to shower away the past couple days and hundreds of miles, but neither of them thought ahead to the whole needing-a-towel part.

“Seriously,” Johnny called over to the next stall. He stood barefoot, shifting over the tile: waving his arms to shake off the excess water. “You don't have one in your bag?”

“I was hitchhiking, not moving house. Who thinks to bring a towel on the road?”

Damn it. Their time was running out and there were actual truckers waiting for a turn; Johnny sighed and reached for his clothing. Dragging his jeans up his wet legs was uncomfortable, chafing. His new shirt stuck to his chest. And despite trying to squeeze all the water out of his hair, it still dripped down to his shoulders, making him shiver slightly in the air-conditioned station.

“You don't think we can pick up athlete's foot or something from using those, do you?” asked Daniel in the outer room. He was still doing up the buttons of his fly, and kept having to shake his head like a wet dog to get the hair out of his eyes.

Without responding, Johnny reached across the bathroom sinks and tore out a generous handful of paper towels. He divided them roughly in two and passed one over to the other boy, who accepted it with a dubious look. Johnny proceeded to use his roughly on his hair, face, and neck.

He turned around to find Daniel watching him with a wrinkled nose.

“What?”

“I don't think that went how you thought it was going to. Cheap gas station paper towels, I mean.” He gestured at Johnny's head with the hand still holding his stack.

Johnny looked in the mirror, at the disintegrating bits of paper now distributed throughout his tangled hair. His shoulder fell slightly. “Damn it.”

Daniel tilted his chin up to dab with showy care at his neck and

shoulders. “You look like you got into a fight with paper shredder.” And when Johnny threw the torn handful into the trash and went for the door: “Hey, no, it's a look! I think you can pull it off.”

They bought some snacks (“I'm not living off this shit for the next few days, we *are* stopping and eating real food at some point,” said Daniel, even as he ripped open a jerky stick with his teeth: jerky *Johnny* had bought for him, the ungrateful little prick.) and got back on the road.

And Daniel... settled in. There were really no other words for it. If Johnny had thought he'd made himself at home before, he now treated Johnny giving him another ride as permission to spread out and claim territory.

He put his seat back a couple degrees and turned his left shoulder blade into the corner, so he was almost, but not quite, brushing up into Johnny's airspace. He put his feet up out the window; Johnny immediately hit the brakes and started edging onto the shoulder, and Daniel hurriedly took them down, saying:

“Okay, okay, take it easy, man.”

Daniel had grabbed a fat folded map of US Route 66 in Flagstaff, and he spent the next half hour studying it. Johnny kept batting the edge of the paper out of the way when the wind threatened to blind him with it.

“Hey, pull off here,” he said suddenly, looking up and squinting at a road sign. He pointed off to the right at nothing Johnny could see.

Johnny obeyed without thinking and was then so annoyed about it, he considered getting back on the road just to prove a point. Except Daniel looked kind of excited, sitting up in his seat and craning his neck, and it seemed like too much effort.

Daniel directed him south for a few miles across a bleak, featureless landscape and made him park at a dirt and gravel trailhead. There was no one else around for miles; Johnny couldn't get over how empty it was in Arizona.

“What are we doing here, exactly?” he asked in the silence of cutting the engine.

“Can't you read?” said Daniel. “It's a National Landmark.”

“I can read just fine, thanks. Dick. What I *can't* do is see anything here worth calling a landmark.”

“We gotta walk. C'mon.” And he hopped out of the car.

Now they were no longer cruising along at highway speed, Johnny could see that the other boy's hair had dried in a truly stupid looking fashion. He focused on this as he climbed out and followed him down the dusty walking trail.

“This isn't going to take long, is it?” he said to the other boy's back.

Daniel's thin shoulders rose and fell. He looked back over his shoulder with a slight grin. “Does it matter?”

Johnny thought about that for a moment, kicking small stones out of the way with his feet. He reached a hand up and ran it through his hair; small bits of dried paper came out on his fingers. He rubbed them and watched as they were caught by the wind and snatched away.

“Guess not,” he said belatedly.

Barringer Crater to Winslow

They walked for maybe ten minutes, and it was all uphill. Johnny would've given Daniel shit for it, but it actually felt really good to stretch his legs after the past couple days. His hip flexors felt a little tight, and he was starting to think the other boy had the right idea about stretching now and again on the road. Maybe he could do some while he was in the bathroom next time or something.

However, as the trail continued and it appeared no closer to showing anything worthwhile, he had to call ahead, “So what exactly was so great they decided to slap a trail on it? If this ends up being some marker for an old wagon trail, I'm putting you in a headlock.”

Daniel only flapped a hand at him; he didn't even turn around. Johnny sighed and muttered under his breath.

The last fifty feet or so grew progressively steeper, and the trail became switchback. Daniel quickened his pace. Johnny still couldn't see anything except the sky and the plains all around in every direction and then he stepped up next to Daniel and looked out and—

“That's a big hole,” he said.

Daniel gave him an incredulous look. “'That's a big hole', he says. *That* is a crater from a meteor that fell to Earth like 50,000 years ago.”

Johnny slapped his pointing hand down and said, “Okay, so it's an *old,* big hole.”

“How are you not impressed by this?” he demanded.

And the thing was, Johnny was kinda impressed, a little. But he did not want to admit it; it was more fun riling Daniel up.

“I told you, California has basically everything. You know there's an old quarry over in Jurupa Valley, a toxic waste dump? I hear it's pretty big. Maybe not quite as big as this, but—”

Daniel put both hands on his chest and shoved him. Johnny let it take him a couple steps back, grinning out at the – okay, yes, *very* big hole in the ground.

They stood on the rim for a couple minutes, looking around at the empty, listening to the wind over the silence.

Presently, Johnny looked around for something to throw. He found a decent-sized pebble and, as Daniel watched, wound up and pitched it over the rim into the crater.

Johnny waited and then said, “I don't know why, but I thought I'd hear it land.”

Daniel shook his head. “You wanna hear something?” And before Johnny could reply – “uh, *no*” – the other boy cupped his hands over his mouth and hollered wordlessly at the top of his lungs.

The Jersey loudmouth echo came back from all sides and Daniel grinned.

“Sounds like there's a dozen of you,” said Johnny, scuffing his sneaker in the dirt. “What a terrifying thought.”

Winslow wasn't much further on down the road, and Daniel spent the entire drive with his knees up against the dash, holding the map secretively to his chest and demanding Johnny guess what it was known for. And all because Johnny had mentioned it sounded familiar.

“Was he like, a rich guy? Or an athlete?”

“No,” said Daniel. “Or – I mean. I don't know, maybe. It's not what the town was named after, that's not it.”

“Well then, how am I supposed to guess? And get your knees off the dash.”

“Okay, do you want a hint?” he asked, his knees sliding down with insulting slowness.

Johnny stared out at the road, brow lowered. “No – yes. What is it.”

“Uh, this is something you need to do more often.”

Johnny waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, he said, “What the fuck kind of hint is that? That could be like a million things. Jerking off, is it jerking off?”

“What does jerking off have to do with Winslow?” asked Daniel, confused. “And who tells you to jerk off *more often*?”

Bobby had recommended it the previous fall, in a half-joking way. “I don't know, shut up. Just – different clue, man.”

Daniel sighed like this simple request was a trial. “Okay, okay.” He thought about it. “You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. Story of your life, man. Before this trip, anyway.”

“Hotel California?” he said, confused.

“Band.”

“The Eagles.”

Daniel leaned forward. “And another song of theirs is....”

Johnny got it and slapped the wheel hard. “Take it easy. Standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona. Damn it.”

“Bingo.”

They drove in silence for about half a minute.

“Wait. What do you mean, I need to *take it easy*,” said Johnny.

Winslow to Holbrook

Johnny had his elbow out the window, wrist over the wheel, and he was feeling – he was feeling good. No hangover, a recent shower, and the road will do that to a person, he guessed. He always turned a corner in the afternoons, no matter how grim a start the day had.

They were rolling through some truly desolate landscape now: shrub steppe far as the eye could see. They hadn't passed more than two cars in the past half-hour. Striated red mesas pushed up here and there, hints of deeper mysteries waving at him from a distance: come look, wander down this way and disappear. His brain told him he might find something in one of those canyons.

“Coming up on the Petrified Forest,” said Daniel.

“We just stopped,” Johnny pointed out, not really looking away from a pair of tall buttes sitting at ten o'clock off his dashboard.

“Yeah, but it's a national park.”

He blinked and made himself look over. “What's it got?”

Daniel sat up, turning to him, bare left knee pressing against his own seat back. He didn't look up from the map as he read:

“The Petrified Forest is a grand vista of painted erosion and renewal, making it a unique representation of the American story—”

“What does *that* mean?”

“I dunno,” said Daniel, glancing up. “Like maybe, stuff sucks for a very long time, and then briefly stops sucking, so people think it might be good?”

Johnny shook his head and shrugged out the windshield. It was beyond him.

Daniel continued: “At the Blue Mesa, you will see how the petrified logs play a part in the constant renewal of the sculptured landscape. The soft earth erodes away, leaving a gradually narrowing ridge beneath the length of each log. Eventually, sections of the log—”

“I'm hearing a lot about logs,” interrupted Johnny. “Are you telling me this park is just about a forest that isn't even a forest anymore?”

Daniel said, sounding annoyed, “That's not – I mean, yeah, it's petrified, that's why it's called the Petrified Forest, genius. But the logs are supposed to look pretty cool.”

“The logs,” said Johnny slowly, “are supposed to look pretty cool.”

Daniel lowered the map. “There's also the landscape.”

“Which we can see from the road.”

“What, suddenly you're in a hurry?”

“Not wanting to waste time isn't the same as being in a hurry,” said Johnny and then he reached over into the unsuspecting boy's lap and grabbed the map. He threw it over his shoulder, where the highway slipstream shot it out behind the car.

“Hey!” Daniel was up on his knees in an instant, reaching like he had a hope of grabbing it in time. He stared at the map in the shrinking distance, now just another tumbleweed in the desert. Then he sat back on his heels and looked at Johnny in disbelief. “That was our only map. You just threw away our only map.”

“We don't need a map,” he said, settling back into place: knees relaxed and wide, elbow back on the window.

“We got lost and ran out of gas *literally yesterday*.”

“Now who's in a hurry?” he asked, looking over like, match point.

After a moment, Daniel's jaw cocked like he was chewing his cheek. He was slow in turning back around and slumping down, head falling back against the seatrest. Within five seconds he looked deeply bored again and he said:

“I spy something red.”

Johnny looked out at the horizon, which was filled with red mesas and buttes, and the occasional red flowering shrub. He looked at the Avanti, his cherry red babe. He thought about it.

“...Is it my face?” he said.

“Damn it.”

Holbrook to Gallup

They made it a couple more hours, at some point passing across the New Mexico state line, before Daniel got insistent about stopping for food. Gallup was the first decent-sized town they'd seen since Flagstaff, by which Johnny meant—

“There's a McDonald's.”

“No. C'mon, we had McDonald's for breakfast.”

Yeah, and it was good? But he didn't bother saying this, recognizing from Daniel's tone it wouldn't be worth the argument.

Johnny widened his eyes sarcastically at the road and looked around again. The highway went right through the town, the main drag five lanes wide and lined with lodges and motels, signs proclaiming they were now in Indian County and advertising rodeos and western wholesale goods. There was also—

“Wendy's?”

Daniel looked over. “Johnny, you're killing me here.”

They drove through and Johnny took a right turn onto Third Street into what looked like the closest thing this place had to a downtown. It was almost seven, and the sun was getting low in the sky. Some signs' lights were already flickering on.

“What are you even looking for,” Johnny asked. “White tablecloths, dinner jacket requirements? I mean, look at us. Look at *me*. I've been wearing the same jeans for like five days straight—”

“You only picked me up yesterday, man,” said Daniel, giving him the hairy eyeball.

“Okay, you tell me, how fresh are those shorts of yours?”

Daniel slapped a hand down on the edge of the door. “Okay, okay – so we get take-out someplace and find a laundromat, how's that for dinner plans? Two birds, one stone.”

“That's not two birds, one stone.” He raised two fingers and put them in his face. Daniel jerked his head back. “Two birds, two stones, they just happen to be close together.”

"*Whatever*. That work?"

Johnny sighed and leaned back towards his own door. "Yeah, that works."

They located a laundromat, and Johnny dropped Daniel off to scope out the nearby restaurants, hunt down a pizza or something while he backtracked to a drugstore he saw a few blocks away.

He had no idea what day it was, but it didn't look like the store would be open much longer, so he hastened inside. He needed a fucking toothbrush so bad, he was prepared to break a window if he had to. The Indian girl behind the counter didn't look up from her magazine as the bell above the door rang and, aside from a bent-backed old white lady peering at nasal sprays, the store was empty.

He wandered the cramped aisles for a bit after grabbing the toothbrush and toothpaste, trying to think of what else he might need on the road. The place wasn't exactly a Sears; there were no home goods or even basic clothes, which was bad news for his boxer shorts. He couldn't find any towels either, and spent a truly stupid couple minutes considering a three-piece set of patterned dishtowels instead.

In the end, he grabbed a bottle of generic combo shampoo and conditioner and lotion for his sunburn and called it quits. At the register, he threw a pack of playing cards in on a whim.

On the sidewalk outside the drugstore, he stopped and surreptitiously counted out his cash. He had almost $220 left, which he thought should be more than enough to make it to Chicago and back. For not the first time, he wished he'd stopped in Victorville yesterday morning and maxed out the allowed withdrawals on his card. What did he know about budgeting?

He shoved the cash back into his wallet and walked to his car.

When he rolled up to the laundromat, Daniel was already sitting inside with a pizza box next to his hip atop the folding counter, a portrait of teenage boredom lit up visible from the darkening sidewalk. Johnny reached into the backseat and hooked the strap of

the other boy's bag and then went around to his trunk to grab his own shirt from that morning.

Daniel hopped down and held the door open for him, saying obnoxiously, “Let me show you to your table, sir.”

They both inhaled a slice of pizza before stripping down to their boxers and shoving everything into a washing machine. Daniel counted out change and Johnny thought hard for a second before skating down the length of the room in his socks, peering all around until—

“A-ha!” He grabbed the cardboard box labeled Lost & Found and dug through it. It was mostly single socks and a random assortment of kids' clothes. Once, intriguingly, a bra with what looked like a decent cup size. But at the bottom he found a man's faded black sweatshirt. It said Gallup Bengals in bright orange lettering and its sleeves were perhaps a little too short, and it kind of smelled a little like pot, but he wasn't about to be picky.

Daniel watched as he returned with the sweater in hand, eyebrow quirked. “Couldn't we just stop somewhere and you could buy something?”

He tossed the sweater into the washing machine with the other clothes. “Yeah, but this has a better story.”

“A box in the back of a random laundromat?”

“Shut up.” Johnny braced a hand over the open door of the washing machine and thought hard. He was pretty sure he could smell his boxers just standing there. Hard decision here. He turned to Daniel and said, “You got a spare set of boxers I could wear?”

His eyes widened a little. “Uh, no.”

“No, you don't, or no, *fuck off, Johnny, you're not good enough to wear my boxers*?”

“They wouldn't fit you anyway, man,” protested Daniel. “Think about it.”

“Do you smell these,” he demanded, gesturing at his crotch. “Because I can. There's no way I'm leaving here without washing them, so it's either I stand here for forty minutes flashing every person passing down the sidewalk and maybe get arrested, in which case you're shit

out of luck for that ride, *or* you lend me a pair of shorts until they're clean." He folded his arms and waited for a decision.

Daniel looked like he was actually thinking about it, until Johnny's hands dropped threateningly to his waistband and then he shouted, "Alright, alright! Jesus."

The blue plaid shorts Daniel threw at his head *were* too small. He was probably stretching the elastic of the waistband into uselessness and, because Daniel had stupid skinny legs, the cotton fabric stretched taut around his upper thighs. But his dick was covered, so Johnny was calling it good.

Daniel kept hunching forward and then straightening up, probably not comfortable with standing around mostly naked in a strange room. His eyes moved around the room constantly, like if he stared at the wall hard enough, he could pretend this wasn't happening.

Johnny had been in enough locker rooms in life that he could ignore it: the chill on his skin, the gooseflesh spreading along Daniel's tan pecs. Johnny was a master at ignoring it all.

He took out the deck of cards and waved them. "War?"

"War's for kids," said Daniel. "You know Speed?"

"Do I know Speed," Johnny muttered, already dealing.

They leaned along the folding counter like that, slapping cards down and cursing each other, until the buzzer for the machine went.

By the time their stuff was done drying, they were both yawning. The guy who'd come in with ten minutes to go on the machine was steadily mopping the floor, keys on his belt jangling with every push, and seemed content to ignore them as they awkwardly pulled their clothing back on. He'd probably seen it all before, Johnny figured.

It was fully dark outside when they got back in the Avanti. Daniel shut his door and slumped against it, blinking slowly at nothing.

Johnny rubbed his eyes. “What the hell,” he said eventually. "Barely nine."

“Guess we have been up since dawn.”

“Yeah.” He sighed and turned the key, flipped his lights. The Avanti roared to life, and even though he'd never been to this town before, the sight of the street looked reassuringly familiar under the spill of her headlights. He could be anywhere, he thought, and it'd look right.

“How much further should we go, do you think?” asked Daniel as Johnny pulled a slow U-turn and started back towards the highway. Neon bar lights left and right, and on another night he might feel tempted.

“Not far. Just want to get out of town, then we can pull over somewhere.”

“Sleeping in the car again?” To his credit, Daniel kept the complaint in his voice to a minimum. Though that was probably down to fatigue more than anything, he thought.

“You got a better idea?”

“Don't all you Hills kids get issued credit cards when you turn fourteen? Put a room on your stepdad's plastic. C'mon, you know you want to.”

Johnny kept his eyes on the traffic lights. Stale green; never know when one would go yellow. “Can't,” he said, after a moment.

Whatever response he was expecting – probably for Johnny to tell him to shove it – that was not it. Johnny could practically hear him come to attention in the other seat.

“Yeah?” he said: so, so casual. “And why's that?”

They get back to 66. Johnny took a right. “Those cards aren't magic, man. I use it, they can call up the card company.”

“Yeah. And?”

He finally looked at him. “And then they'll know where I am.”

He put his eyes back on the road and reached down for the radio dial. They'd found out earlier that New Mexico, much like Arizona, played nothing but terrible hokey old country music, but whatever. He'd take the twang and tough it out.

The lights of stores and hotels along a street wouldn't blur no matter how fast he went. He always found that kind of disappointing.

They found a disused service station twenty minutes down the road. There were some squat shoebox houses scattered along the wayside a little further on, but no lights were on in any of them.

“An abandoned gas station,” said Daniel. “Yeah, this is totally ideal.”

“I thought so.” Johnny pulled in behind the back of the building and cut the engine.

Neither of them talked much as they shuffled about, getting ready to bed down. Johnny splashed some water on his new toothbrush and spent what felt like ten minutes vigorously scrubbing the scum out his mouth. He could hear Daniel spitting a few feet behind him, doing the same thing.

“Probably should put the top up?” said Daniel when Johnny returned to the car. “Might help with the night temperature.”

So they did that, and then Daniel pulled on his flannel shirt and Johnny his new Gallup Bengals sweater – sleeves didn't even reach the knobs of his wrists, whatever – and they crawled into their respective sides of the car.

Johnny blinked drowsily at the passenger side foot well. He could hear Daniel turning around on the backseat, trying to find a position he could settle in.

“We should get a room tomorrow,” said Daniel. “There are some pretty cheap roadside motels. Like, ten, fifteen bucks. That's nothing split two ways.”

Johnny tucked his elbows in close to his chest. He rubbed his cheek against the seat leather.

“Just think about it: bed you can stretch those long-ass legs out on. A pillow. Actual towels.”

Johnny shut his eyes.

“It'd be like... paradise, man.”

The Continental Divide to Grants

He had the hood of his sweater pulled low over his eyes, but it was still not enough to keep out the morning light. And even if he could ignore that, there was no ignoring Daniel's voice rambling on to himself as he dug through the trunk of the Avanti, taking stock of its meager contents.

“...not like I'm unfamiliar with spur of the moment decisions, but at least when I hopped the plane, I packed a bag first. What was your plan? Drive around the desert until you came across a town in need of a karate guy like some kind of weird western hero?” (That actually sounded pretty cool, Johnny thought.) “You got water for the radiator, a spare tire and fancy jack, some motor oil, jumper cables, and I don't even know what the hell *this* thing is,” he must've been looking at the portable air compressor, “but no change of clothes, no food? We gotta work on your priorities, man.”

You have no idea, thought Johnny. He decided to close his eyes again.

He rolled over onto his back a few minutes later: hip aching a little from sleeping in the same position all night, legs jacked awkwardly into the foot well of the drivers side. He opened his eyes, blinking crusty eyelashes in confusion, because the top was suddenly down: blue sky pouring in and Daniel hanging over the passenger door, face inches from his.

“You gotta get up, man. I'm starving,” he said.

Johnny exhaled a long, resigned breath through his nose. He put his hand up, palm covering the other boy's disgustingly awake features, and pushed his face away.

Johnny vindictively stole Daniel's sunglasses, because it was early enough for the sun to be at the perfect angle to pierce his retinas and dig into his vulnerable morning brain, and what did Daniel need a brain for, anyway.

They drove, expecting to find something at the next stop or two down the road. They drove, and drove.

“More ghosts towns than towns out here,” commented Daniel. He had his elbow on the door and his head on his elbow, eyes slitted against the morning sun. The wind blowing his hair back. Johnny wasn't able to really look at him this morning, and he had a sinking feeling about why.

Why not, he thought wearily to himself. Everything else in your life is a mess.

In Grants, they found a diner with a special on bottomless plates of pancakes and set to trying to ruin its profit margin. Johnny gradually woke up with the steady infusion of sugar and carbs, and by the end of the meal he could meet Daniel's eyes without staring at the streak of syrup on his pink bottom lip.

“How far do you think we'll get today?” said Daniel, pouring over a new map. Johnny thought he must've went next door to the fuel station while he was in the bathroom. Sneaky twerp. “Texas, at least, right?”

“Yeah, probably,” said Johnny, who had no idea. Daniel seemed to forget Johnny had never been outside of California unless he was actively talking shit about it.

“Maybe even Oklahoma, it doesn't look like the Texas strip is that long.”

“Yeah.” He swirled his last forkful of triple-stacked pancake around his plate and shoved it into his mouth. As he was chewing, he remembered something critical. He tried speaking, but all his words came out muffled.

Daniel glanced up from the map, dark eyes unimpressed and mocking. “Take it easy, slick. No rush.”

Johnny's brow collapsed in a scowl. He rearranged the pancake so it was pushing out one cheek and said while gesturing with his fork, “We're stopping in Texas.”

And Daniel, who had thus far talked with a fair degree of amity, immediately got suspicious. “Why?”

“I hear they don't check IDs there. We can go to a bar – a roadhouse,

that's what they call them."

"No way either of us looks twenty-one," said Daniel.

"Well, no, you look fourteen, I agree," he said, "but that don't matter. Drinking age in Texas is like, nineteen."

"How do you know that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, I read about it. In like, an encyclopedia or something."

"Yeah," said Daniel slowly, folding the map back up. "Yeah, sounds like something the folks at Britannica would make sure to include."

Johnny decided not to tell him about the syrup on his face.

Grants to Laguna

“So,” said Daniel, as they got on the road again after stocking up on water and snacks. Johnny spied him tucking a second map into the front pocket of his bag, and was so impressed by his paranoia, he decided to leave it alone. “You wanna... I don't know, talk about it?”

“No,” said Johnny. And, decision thus safely rendered: “Talk about what?”

Daniel rolled his head along the seat to squint at him. “Why you don't want your folks to know where you are.”

Why did Johnny ever doubt his instincts? They were always spot-on. “Yeah, I don't wanna talk about it. It's not a big deal.”

“Right.” Disbelief in his voice, which got on his nerves. You share a car with a guy for two days and he thinks he knows something.

Johnny sniffed and thumbed his nose; his nostrils were dry from the desert air. It was annoying. He nudged the sunglasses firmly back into place and said, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You wanna talk about why your sensei isn't in the country?”

Silence was the only answer; it was less satisfying than Johnny expected.

After Grants, the road narrowed as it cut through canyonlands. Red sandstone bluffs rose up around them, cutting off the horizon until it looked like there was only the one way forward. Or, illusions dispelled: there had always been only the one way.

The blue car had sat in Johnny's rearview for about twenty minutes when he finally mentioned it. Daniel, because he possessed all the subtlety of a kid who once dressed as a seven-foot shower stall, immediately twisted in his seat and put his head up to stare back at it.

“Nice car,” he said after a moment. “What is that, a Chevy Camaro?”

“Nah, think it's a Pontiac,” said Johnny, eyes drifting between the road and his mirrors, trying to get a look at the headlights. “Firebird, maybe.”

“Why's he just sitting back there, do you think? Why not pass?”

A river joined the action from the south, trapping the highway between the sheer walls of a mesa on the left and a steep drop to water on the right. The road began to twist and turn as it negotiated the tight space; Johnny quit looking in the mirrors and put both hands on the wheel.

They passed a road sign for a dead man's curve ahead. He and Daniel both looked at it and then exchanged a glance.

Behind them, the engine of the Pontiac opened up with a roar.

“Oh, you've gotta be kidding me,” said Johnny, and slammed his foot on the gas as the Firebird whipped into the next lane.

“Johnny, what the fuck, are you *crazy*—”

They sped neck in neck towards the curve, Daniel hollering in his ear the whole time, screaming orders Johnny didn't listen to, because he was focused on the other driver, who wasn't flinching, wasn't falling back. The hairpin was coming up and if there was any traffic from the other direction they were all toast—

“I will pull your emergency brake,” said Daniel suddenly in his ear, voice dark and furious. He was out of his seatbelt and pressed all up against Johnny's side, one hand tight around the back of his neck and the other firmly wrapped around said brake.

Johnny took his foot off the gas, and the Pontiac shot ahead, merging into their lane just in time to hit the brakes and careen around the curve in a skid of black rubber. Daniel fell hard back against the passenger door as they went around the turn themselves; he was a fucking idiot not wearing his belt, served him right.

On the clear road ahead, the Firebird driver stuck his hand out his window and gave them the finger.

“*Dammit*,” said Johnny, and pounded his steering wheel. He glared over at Daniel, still a sprawled mess in the seat. He thought he could still feel the heat of his hand on his neck. “What the hell's the matter with you?”

For a couple seconds, he thought the other boy was going to launch himself at Johnny, moving car be damned. But then he shut his eyes and breathed deliberately, and reoriented himself forward in the seat. He reached for his seatbelt; the click sounded loud despite the drone of the highway.

They didn't talk again for a while.

Laguna to Albuquerque

“The route forks at Albuquerque,” said Daniel, a ways on. He'd retreated once more behind his map and was slouched so far down in the seat, his ass was practically tipping into the footwell. He had his knees up against the dash again. Johnny ignored all of it.

“What do you mean, forks.” He waited a second. “Well?”

“Hang on, I'm reading,” came the annoyed voice behind the paper.

Johnny scowled at the road. He put his elbow out and leaned his head against his hand, sighing inaudibly. It was impossible to ignore the cold mood radiating out from the other seat. He kept trying to think of something to say about the incident with the other car, but everything he came up with sounded off, whiny.

Something else held him back from speaking about it: a worry that Daniel wouldn't understand, even if Johnny miraculously found the right words. And, he realized suddenly, staring hard ahead at the road, that mattered to him. Being understood mattered. In general, maybe, but also specifically by the other boy.

It wasn't about ego, he wanted to explain. It wasn't even about winning. But he remained silent, afraid that if he spoke aloud, he'd just be speaking to himself.

“Okay,” said Daniel, brusquely oblivious as he lowered the map. “So – we pass Mesita yet? Or some place called Suwanee?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “but they weren't exactly towns.”

“That's fine. So Route 66 goes through Albuquerque following I-40, cutting across the state in more or less a straight line. But the *original* Route 66 looped up through Santa Fe.”

“What do you mean, original?”

“It was redesigned in the 30s.” Daniel looked at him expectantly. Johnny glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes, nonplussed. “So – what do you wanna do?”

What he didn't want to do was make a decision. He truly did not care. “Uh, what's the miles difference?” he asked, stalling.

Daniel squinted down at the map, muttering to himself. “I don't know, maybe like – 50, 60 miles?” He looked up again.

“Is there some reason you want to see Santa Fe?”

He shrugged. “Hit so few cities so far, seems like there's no reason not to.”

Sounded like he had an opinion. “Look, if you want to go that way, why not just say so?”

“I thought the fact that I brought it up in the first place probably spoke for itself,” said Daniel, an edge growing in his voice. “I'm just asking what you think. You know, like a civilized person.”

“Well, I don't care either way.”

“You don't care.” Somehow this also seemed to piss the other boy off.

Johnny stuck to his guns. His empty-chambered, useless broke-ass guns. “Nope.”

“Fine.” Daniel started folding the map again, movements short and fast. Angry. “Then we're doing Santa Fe.”

Johnny's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He said evenly, “Alright, then.”

Daniel showed his teeth in a smile. “Okay.”

“Great.”

“Fucking fantastic.”

So they took a left turn at Albuquerque.

Albuquerque to Santa Fe

It was like the previous couple days were a dream, and they'd both woke up disoriented and wondering who slipped them a mickey, each probably suspecting it was the other guy.

Daniel was the first to broach the subject, because of course he was; since when was he able to let anything go. Especially anything that involved a bodily threat to himself. And yeah, it's not that Johnny didn't get it. He just didn't have an answer.

They rolled north along the Rio Grande, passing through Albuquerque and its scattered, sprawling outer settlements: little clumps of towns sprouting up in the desert, every one of them looking makeshift despite their paved roads and solid buildings.

“So what was it,” said Daniel, like he was picking up a conversation started miles back, “were you trying to get us killed, or does the idea of some random asshole showing you up bug you that bad?”

Johnny kept his eyes on the road and said nothing.

“I mean, I'm just trying to understand here,” he continued, shifting up in his seat; turning to Johnny and using that same fake friendly voice he deployed so many times last year: “Why don't you help me with that?”

Johnny raised his chin a little, checked his mirrors. Drove on.

“It's just – I figure, you're so obsessed with this car, right? You get antsy if I lean on it when pumping gas. So you can understand my confusion when you pull a stupid stunt like that back there—”

“She'd understand,” said Johnny, not being able to help himself. He clenched his jaw around a wince then because—

“She? Excuse me, *who*? Are you talking about the car?” Daniel threw himself against the dash in a bid to catch Johnny's eye. Waste of effort; the guy was always wasting so much effort with him. “I genuinely can't tell if you are joking or not.”

“Look, just drop it, man. Okay?” He glanced over, trying to communicate his seriousness with his expression. Might've worked better if he took off Daniel's sunglasses, but he didn't want to.

Priorities.

Daniel's face twisted, mutinous. But he sat back. Threw his right elbow out the window and stared in the direction it pointed.

And Johnny drove on.

By the time they hit Santa Fe, they weren't speaking and almost didn't stop, despite the whole detour Daniel had planned for expressly this purpose.

Except they were out of snacks and hadn't eaten since breakfast – those pancakes felt like a week ago, and both of them different people – so Johnny pocketed his key and wordlessly agreed when Daniel spotted the taco truck idling a few blocks off from the gas station bordering the downtown area.

When asked what level of spice he wanted, Daniel hesitated and cast a challenging look sidelong at Johnny, who narrowed his eyes back. *Hot,* said Daniel, like being Italian meant he had some claim on taste bud toughness or whatever. Johnny didn't grace him with a roll of the eyes, but asked for the same anyway.

Ten minutes later found them both sweating over some bushes and breathing in thin, wheezing gasps, hurriedly trading a cup of water back and forth.

“Death by taco, didn't see that one coming,” said Daniel afterwards. They were sitting on the strip of crab grass between the road and sidewalk, both wanting to monitor the situation in their gut before getting back on the road.

“There are dumber ways to die,” said Johnny, cutting his eyes over. He meant it as a peace offering, he guessed.

Daniel hesitated, chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully. After a couple seconds he shrugged and offered the water cup to Johnny again. And just like that, they were back.

But who knew how long it would hold.

Santa Fe to Tucumcari

“Do you think anyone who lives around here ever thinks about California?” said Daniel.

They were blowing past the southern edge of the Rockies range: climbing and cruising, climbing and cruising through the foothills east of Santa Fe.

On one particularly steep descent, Johnny put the Avanti in neutral, curious to see what she'd get up to; they reached 75 before Daniel picked up on the strange free-falling feel of the car. He told him to cut it out, but – carefully, like he didn't want to get into another fight. That alone was weird enough to make Johnny put the car back into gear and continue on as normal.

“What do you mean, think about California?” he asked.

“Like, my ma spent eight months gearing up for our move before she even told me we were doing it. Started complaining about Newark a bit more, talking about how much better it probably was in other places. Y'know – that sort of thing.” Daniel folded his arms, turning slightly in his seat. He looked thoughtful as he stared ahead at the road. “And I was just wondering, do you think the people here think about California like she did? Are they thinking about some other place? Meanwhile, you and me, we're out here wondering what it's like to live here or anywhere else.”

Johnny scratched his jaw, tugged his ear. He shrugged. “People get bored with what they know. Not that complicated.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“Well, what do you mean?”

“I just think it's kinda – sad, is all. Don't you think it's sad, all these people constantly daydreaming about living somewhere else, living some other life? Instead of just being present in their own? Like, some people probably spend years doing it. Decades, even.”

“A moment ago,” said Johnny, a hard edge to his voice he doesn't quite understand himself, “you were asking if people here thought about California or someplace else. Now you've up and decided they do.”

Daniel's hands flew up. “Because they do, I know they do. *Everybody* does, that's what this whole Route 66 thing is about, ain't it? It's about people moving on. They're always moving on.”

“That's not what Route 66 is about.”

The surety in Johnny's voice seemed to startle Daniel. His eyebrows went up and then his eyes narrowed a little, like he was hunting. “Oh? Then what's it all about?” He relaxed back in his seat, all bright-eyed attention.

Johnny didn't like the look. He wished he hadn't spoken at all. “It's about getting from Point A to Point B without killing the guy you're driving, that's what I think it's about.”

A couple hours down the road they rejoin the main route. They make it a little further along before stopping in a small town that is, according to Daniel-with-the-map, the largest city between Albuquerque and Amarillo, Texas.

“Population 6,675,” Johnny read off the passing sign on their way into town. “God, is the entire middle of the country like this? What the hell.”

“It's the desert, what do you expect?” Daniel sat up straight and pointed off to the right, “There, there. Pull in there.”

Johnny eyed the white building with the tee-pee molded into the front face. *Tee Pee Curios* read the front in large red letters. “Weren't you bitching about tourist traps like, a day ago?” he muttered, but he turned right anyway.

“I want to grab a postcard or two,” said Daniel, unrepentant. “Maybe write something to Mr. Miyagi.”

“I thought you said he was out of the country?”

Daniel's voice went annoyed. “So I'll send it to Okinawa.”

“You'll probably be back in California before it arrives,” said Johnny, and then bit his tongue, because he didn't know Daniel's plans. He didn't know why he said that. Daniel looked at him a little quizzically, and he said quickly, “Look, I'll come back and get you – gonna go look

for some place that can sell me some socks and shit." He thought he saw a Farm & Ranch supply store a quarter-mile back, and it couldn't hurt to check.

Daniel glanced into the backseat, and Johnny could almost hear him thinking about grabbing his bag, just in case Johnny decided to abandon him or something. His hands tightened on the wheel, and he almost said something scathing.

The moment passed, and Daniel stepped back from the car. "See you in a bit, then," he said, like it was nothing.

In the Farm & Ranch supply store, he grabbed a packet each of basic cotton crew socks and boxers, and then spent ten minutes wandering around looking for anything else they might conceivably need.

In the small camping section, he found a dull green wool blanket, probably army surplus by the look of it. He remembered Daniel complaining about the cold in the car the past two nights and grabbed it off the shelf without thinking too hard about why. Outside, he tossed it in the trunk, and it felt a bit like he was hiding it.

Daniel was already sitting outside on a dusty parking block when he rolled back up to the Tee Pee Curios. He'd bought a new pair of sunglasses, and they effectively hid his expression as he watched the Avanti approach.

“Find your postcards?” asked Johnny when he climbed back into the car.

“Yeah. Find some underwear?”

Johnny slid Daniel's sunglasses – now his, he guessed – down over his eyes and gunned the car forward without replying.

Daniel spent the next hour sitting cross-legged on the seat, shoes abandoned below as he hunched over the postcard in his lap and tried to write to his sensei.

It was a little weird; he seemed to agonize over every word, but he didn't give up. He tapped his pen against his thigh, spun it restlessly through his fingers. He put his head back and stared at the sky. He sighed a lot.

Johnny didn't understand how someone could be so distracting just sitting there.

“What's your damage, man?” he asked eventually.

Daniel raised his head and frowned. “What?”

“It's a postcard, not a letter you're writing from the front lines. You're

not supposed to overthink those things."

"What do you know? Have you ever written a single postcard in your life?"

Johnny glanced at the postcard in his lap, which he knew had a picture of the Santa Fe Railway on the other side. "Call it a hunch, but I just don't think any vital message ever comes on a scrap of paper with a choo-choo train on the other side."

Daniel shook his head and resumed brooding. Forty minutes later, after filling the small space with a dense block of tiny black lines, he broke the silence with a loud and vehement curse.

"Jesus," said Johnny, stirring. "*What*?"

"I don't have his address in Okinawa," said Daniel. He stared down at the postcard, incensed. "I don't know how to send this to him."

Johnny opened his mouth to say something, but he paused when he got a better look at Daniel's expression. He bit back his first words and said instead, "You know his address in California, right?"

"Yeah, of course, but he's—"

"He'll get it eventually. That's what matters, isn't it?"

Daniel stared at the postcard in his hands a moment longer before muttering, "Yeah, I guess." He opened the glove compartment and tossed the postcard and pen inside, and spent the next half hour looking out his side of the car.

They passed into Texas, which didn't let the moment go unnoticed. The state flag was on everything, and even flew from the occasional gas station by the side of the road.

"Do they think people are going to forget?" asked Johnny, after they passed the third one.

It was getting on to five, though Daniel corrected him – they'd crossed into Central Time at the state line. This revelation had consequences unforeseen by the other boy, because if it was past six, Johnny figured it was past time he found them a bar.

“We still have a couple hours of daylight,” objected Daniel. “Let's keep going.”

“You are not taking this from me,” he replied, though the next few towns were so small, he didn't like his chances at finding a good place.

His salvation came twenty miles west of Amarillo, in a small town just off the highway. Visible from the road and already lit up like Vegas was a long ranch-style building with a sprawling gravel field already half-full of cars.

Johnny carefully rolled the Avanti into the lot and off to the far side. He cut the engine, and he and Daniel twisted in their seats to look over at the roadhouse. Music could be heard through the swinging doors; bad music, but that came with the literal territory, he supposed.

“I don't know, man,” said Daniel, watching a pair of rangy men in cowboy boots and pearl-fastened shirts walk up and enter. “I mean, you're like, Joe California, and I don't think they even have Italians down here—”

“So we're like, fresh blood,” said Johnny, checking his reflection in his rear view mirror. He finger-combed his hair, inspected his teeth. "Makes us more interesting."

“I'm saying, I think we're going to stick out like sore thumbs in there.”

Johnny got out of the car and stretched. It was near the golden hour of the evening, and the sky was empty and beautiful. He was so eager to spend a few hours out of the car, more than a couple feet away from Daniel, he was practically dancing in place. He said, eyes on the prize, “It's on the Interstate, they must get people from all over. How Texan can it really be?”

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, 7:20 PM

They stood just inside the roadhouse and looked around; despite all the cars outside, the place didn't look that full. A milling crowd of western shirts and big belt buckles, shapely hips in tight jeans. But hardly a sea. The place seemed larger on the inside that it had on the outside, but that was the way of any decent bar.

There were way more dead animals on the walls than he would've expected from a place in the middle of a hundred miles of flat farmland. Johnny avoided the eyes of a hissing fox a few feet away.

“What day is it?” he asked Daniel, who thought about it and then shrugged.

“No idea.”

Johnny nodded, determined. “Right, well. I guess it's still early. That's fine. Find us a table, I'll get us a pitcher of something.”

“A pitcher?” said Daniel to his departing back. “Hey, I don't know that I want anything—”

Jesus. Johnny turned back to him real quick and said in an urgent undertone, “You can't talk like that in here.”

Daniel made a face, and Johnny was highly conscious that every passing second they stood there arguing like kids was a second he was failing to make the right impression on the room. Had this guy seriously never been in a proper bar before? Didn't he know the rules?

“Why not?” demanded Daniel.

“One, because you immediately deservedly lose the respect of everyone in here,” said Johnny. “Two, it's stupid. Of course you want a drink. Look around you.” And then the other boy, because he just couldn't help but have an attitude, did just that: slowly and with great expressiveness. Johnny flattened his mouth.

“What am I supposed to be seeing here that's suddenly gonna make me thirsty for bad domestic lager?” asked Daniel.

“Look at the dance floor. You see that, smartass?” It was the first thing Johnny had noticed. He watched as Daniel's eyebrows came down. “Yeah. You're gonna want some liquid courage before jumping into

that."

"Who says I'm going to? Don't get me wrong, I love dancing. I can tear up a dance floor like nobody." He shook out his shoulders, mouth jerking up at the corner. "But that's not dancing."

"Of course it is. It's just dancing without any of the touching, or moves, or sex." Johnny, who hated dancing, thought it looked kind of fun. He just needed to figure out how it worked. Did one just walk up and join the end of a line? Did you wait for a spot to open up?

"So it's not dancing, then," said Daniel, shockingly full of opinions on the subject. "That right there is some kind of weird culty southern battle march. Set to a banjo. They're probably planning a second secession in between the steps. You don't think they do that all night do you? Surely they dance like normal people sometimes, right?"

They were still standing five feet inside the door. A couple people had already looked around at them, expressions curious beneath their massive dorky hats.

Johnny'd had enough. He said flatly, "Find us a table. I'm getting a pitcher. You don't want to drink, that's fine. I'll drink the whole thing myself."

"Hey, now—" began Daniel, but Johnny was already turning and heading to the bar.

Like, *Jesus*.

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, 8:10 PM

Johnny focused.

“Go for the ramp, go for the ramp – yeah, okay, that works. You're good, that's fine. Hey, watch the slingshot, don't you want that target, it's worth double. Ooh, that was close, that was a close one. You'll get it next time, at least you got the extra ball. Not that you know what to do with it, apparently, what was *that*. Have you never played pinball before? You gotta nudge, man, you gotta—”

“Daniel,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Why don't you go get us another pitcher of Lone Star?”

“No way, man. You're about to die and I'm up next.”

“I'm not about to—” In the machine in front of him, the ball dropped into a trap and all the lights went dead as a demoralizing buzzer sounded. It seemed to last for a long time. Rubbing it in. Johnny stared down at the machine hard for a second before straightening up.

Daniel had his hands in his shorts pockets, and was studiously looking away from him. Mouth twisted against laughing, dark eyes innocently wide.

He loomed over him threateningly, and Daniel's eyes went wider for a second before Johnny reached past to snatch the empty pitcher from their table. He shook his head and headed for the bar, muttering.

Johnny focused.

“You could end this with a triple, but I don't know, do you think you can get it? I'm not liking your odds. You could go for the double on the five, and that'd make your next turn a lot easier. Just a thought, just throwing it out there. Take it or leave it, man. I mean, do you plan your throws ahead of time, or are you just kind of winging it until you get a low enough score where you have to actually aim? Just curious. Don't mind me.”

“Daniel,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“After I get this triple and end the game, I'm going to kick your ass.”

“Jeez, no need to get so competitive.”

Johnny dropped his throwing arm and turned to where Daniel was sitting backwards on his chair, waiting for his turn. “So competitive?” he said, incredulous. “*Me*?”

Daniel shrugged and that was it, that was the limit. Johnny turned back to the board and threw his dart like a second thought – hit the triple, of course he did, he can fucking aim. When he turned back to lay into the other boy, Daniel was halfway across the room and laughing.

“This stuff ain't too bad, actually,” said Daniel, tipping his glass back.

“Told you,” said Johnny.

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, 9:40 PM

“I don't know, man,” said Daniel. “Maybe we've had too much to drink for this.”

“Wrong. We've had just enough for this. I mean, it's not something you do sober.”

“He's right,” said an old man, leaning forward on Daniel's either side. Johnny gave him a firm nod. Vindicated by a local, there was no better feeling.

They'd discovered the mechanical bull not long after getting their third pitcher, and Johnny had promptly become fixated. He always did better with a clear goal in front of him. Something he could put all his attention towards. And just then it was conquering this beast.

They watched a young woman approach. She was wearing a pair of cutoff jean shorts that showcased a pair of long tan legs and a checkered shirt tied around her waist. Bouncing brown curls under a white cowboy hat. An amazing rack. They couldn't look anywhere else as she climbed on, and neither could half the crowd.

The bull turned on and Johnny and Daniel both quickly took another drink.

The girl did well, hanging on for ten seconds and making a proper show of it. The crowd whooped and cheered.

Johnny drained his beer. “I'm going in,” he said to Daniel, and stepped forward, cash in hand. The flushed girl looked him up and down as he passed, checking him out. He felt his face go red but he grinned back. Alright.

Mounting the thing was more awkward than he'd imagined from fifteen feet away. The girl had made it look easy, fluid. Johnny didn't think his thighs had ever spread this wide outside of an adductor stretch.

Once he was settled he looked up at the crowd. Daniel was gripping his beer tightly, face fixed in an anticipatory wince. Johnny raised his head high and gave him a wink.

His hands found the rope, and he nodded to the operator.

Next thing he knew, he was lying on his back a couple feet away, staring at the wide wooden beams of the roadhouse ceiling. The crowd roared with laughter.

“Jesus,” he said. Two burly guys stepped forward to help him up, clapping him hard on the back to knock the peanut shells and dust from his shirt.

“First timer,” one of them said in a broad accent. “Don't take it too hard, now. Walk it off, walk it off.”

He walked unsteadily back over to Daniel, who handed him a fresh beer. He accepted it wordlessly, and leaned next to him at the railing, slowly rotating his head on his neck to check for damage. The other boy watched him, something like concern fading and being replaced quickly with amusement.

“Oh, what,” he said. “Like you could do better? That thing's insane. Even the locals can only hold on for a few seconds.”

In response, Daniel set his drink down and started around the railing to the operator. Johnny shook his head. Predictable.

Daniel was just as graceless in his scramble to mount the thing as Johnny had been, but once on he – did something, Johnny couldn't figure out what. One moment he was slumped over, the next he was shifting forward on the bull, tightening his thighs and arching his back.

Johnny quickly took a drink.

The operator hit the juice and the bull began its wild jumping. Daniel's right hand shot out into the air and he lifted himself as it bucked forward, hips moving counterpoint to the motion. A wild grin stole across his face and he hollered out. The crowd shouted back.

He lasted five seconds, all told, but it felt like longer to Johnny.

“That boy's a natural,” said the old man from earlier. “Got the balance for it.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “Guess so.”

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, 10:15 PM

“What you have to understand – no, stop. Where you going?”

Daniel looked down at the hand gripping the front of his T-shirt and slowly back up at Johnny. What, what was that look for? Johnny just wanted him to listen. He scooted forward in his chair a little and continued:

“What you have to understand is, it's. It's a rule of the road, okay. It's principle. Someone throws down a challenge like that asshole did earlier, if you're in, if you're worthy, you don't ignore it. You can't. Ignoring it is like – death. It's death. It's like you already died in that crash that might not have happened anyway, but you'll never know, because you're already dead. Know what I mean? Like, that other driver was asking me a question: do you belong here? Do you belong on this road. Do you deserve that car. And you don't say no to that, man. You can't ever say no, because if you do, well. What do you have left?”

Daniel had settled back in his seat at some point during all this, and he now reached to untangle Johnny's hand from his shirt. His collar was a little stretched, gaping loose around his sun-darkened neck. He blinked a couple times like he was trying to understand, but all he said was:

“Losing tears you up that bad?”

“It's not about losing,” said Johnny immediately. “It's about rising. It's taking the match – like you did last fall, at the All Valley. Your knee was busted. Fighting on that was *stupid*, everyone knew it. The medics must've told you, your sensei must've told you. I mean – right?”

Daniel stared at him.

“But you fought anyway. And yeah, I know winning probably felt really great. It always does. But I'd bet my car keys that wasn't why you fought.” He finally sat back and reached for his beer, satisfied he'd made his point.

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck and laughed a little. Johnny narrowed his eyes interrogatively.

“Nothing, man,” said the other boy. “It's only – I don't think I've ever

heard you say so many words in a row before."

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, 11:10 PM

A band had started playing: raucous, cheerful twangy shit that only sounded as good as it did because of the setting. Hard to say something sounded bad when a couple hundred people were tapping their toes and nodding their heads to it, or dancing like happy, overconfident little twerps who liked to abandon their partner of the road in favor of making it with the first smiling girl who caught his eye.

Johnny watched Daniel spin his girl around one more time and turned away, reaching again for the pitcher. It was mostly empty; he'd have to get another one. Everything was against him just then.

“So is it you don't like to dance, or that you do it as well as you ride the bull?”

He looked up, blinking. After a moment, he recognized the bull-riding girl from the before. She stood with a hand on her hip, grinning crookedly down at him.

“I can dance,” he said, a little defensive. “I mean, I can do the waltz.”

The grin widened. “Oh, the *waltz*. Boy, is that what they teach in grade school where you're from?”

He shifted in his seat. “And the country club.”

Her eyes widened, and she laughed, tossing her curls. “Oh, the *country club*. Oh, my.”

He wasn't a moron, he could tell when someone was flirting with him. It usually involved laughing, for some reason. He stood up and put out his hand. “Look, you wanna dance, or what?” he said.

She put her hand in his, all slow with an affected tilt to her wrist. “Dear sir, it'd be an honor.”

So they danced. After letting him shuffle and awkwardly fail for a few seconds, the girl took pity on him. She grabbed his hands and put them on her hips and shouted over the music into his ear: *just follow my lead* and he did, and okay. It was kinda fun.

"Look at you, Johnny!" called Daniel, spinning energetically past in a whirl of bare arms and laughing smiles with his own dance partner.

"Johnny? That's a roughneck name if I ever heard one," said the girl. "Since when do country club types go by *Johnny*?"

"That's California for you," he said, and let her spin him across the floor.

The High Plains Roadhouse & Grill, Midnight

In retrospect, Johnny would think it was inevitable. You don't put Daniel LaRusso in any confined space with a bunch of other guys for long without one of them wanting to kick his ass. It was like a natural law, or a statistical probability, or something.

Johnny was standing with Nicole, his bull-riding babe who could shoot whiskey and who let him kiss her in the dark back corner for fifteen minutes straight. She was teaching him the Electric Slide.

“And then quarter turn left,” she said, manicured hands turning his hips, and he was pretty sure now she was doing it just to touch him, and he minded not at all, “and then it starts over again.” She tilts her head up with a smile. “Think you can remember all that?”

He grinned down at her. "Just wait, I'm very good at taking direction.”

“Smart-mouthed little fuck, what did you say to me?”

The angry voice cut over the crowd, the music, the shuffling of bodies and grate of bar stools. Johnny looked up sharply, eyes automatically searching and locating Daniel further down the bar.

The other boy was braced back in a familiar position, like he had just been shoved; Johnny recognized the line of his shoulders, the bend of his arms. He was looking up at three guys, all taller of course.

Johnny slipped out of Nicole's hands and made his way over. He caught the arm before it could make contact again and twisted it up into the air, pushing the guy back a couple feet.

“Back off,” he said.

“Thanks,” muttered Daniel, too quiet for anyone else to hear.

“I know he's got a big mouth, but he doesn't mean anything by it,” he said.

“*Thanks*,” said Daniel, much louder and sour.

The guy whose arm he'd twisted was now holding it against his side, and he didn't seem calmer for the interruption. He looked between Johnny and Daniel, expression twisting. “And who are you, his boyfriend?”

Standard fighting words, the content barely mattered next to the tone, and Johnny wasn't really listening. His attention was focused on the shift of the guy's friends to the wings, the setting of their shoulders and widening of their stances.

“Johnny,” said Daniel. He didn't look back but he sounded tense.

“It's fine,” he said. He slid into position, and the guy to his left laughed loudly.

“Aw, what's this? Boy, you know karate or something?”

He risked a glance at Daniel, who met his eyes immediately. He looked like he always did right before a fight, and Johnny didn't know how he'd forgotten this, the raw nerves and fear that overtook the other boy's face, even as he stubbornly prepared to fight. A maddening combination. But there was one difference, and he watched the realization seep into Daniel's expression, this amazing crest of relief displacing the anxiety.

Johnny was on his side this time.

He hasn't fought in nine months, but it doesn't make much of a difference, not after years of training and seven or whatever pints of beer.

It's second nature to let the one guy come at him, judge the thrust of his strength and twist out of the hold while curling a leg around his calf. He goes down between stools and Johnny is able to hop over him and punch the next.

He took an elbow to his left kidney and the third guy got in a lucky punch that skidded roughly along his cheekbone: must've been wearing a ring, because he felt the skin open. That guy got a jab to the solar plexus in return and Mr. Elbow a vicious kick to the groin, because bar fights weren't tournaments and Johnny always liked how opponents went down hard with that, the stupid faces they always made. He never felt bad for the move, so sue him; some guys didn't deserve to have dicks.

Johnny finished the final standing man off with another kick, and damn. That was quick. He was almost disappointed.

He looked around to where Daniel was knocking the first man back off his feet. Daniel met his eyes and Johnny grinned, barely winded.

“That was easy,” he said.

Daniel's smile dropped and his eyes widened, and that was the only warning Johnny got before someone smashed a bottle over the back of his head.

Wildorado to Amarillo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted all the way out the door and across the gravel to the car. Their progress was slow; their balance, unsteady. “Why you gotta be so heavy, man? Stupid blond gorilla.”

Johnny made no reply, which Daniel took as a bad sign. A very bad sign. That had to be on some kind of checklist for concussions, right? Johnny Lawrence does not respond to clear verbal provocation. Brain damage: likely.

“Hey, c'mon, no,” he said as Johnny began to sag towards the ground. “No, no, not that way. Up, up. We gotta get outta here quick, before they call the cops.”

“M'tired,” said Johnny.

“You're not tired, you're just drunk and leaking copious amounts of blood from the back of your head,” snapped Daniel. “Y'know, this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't decided to fight. I get expecting you, of all people, not to fight is like denying some fundamental law of the universe, but what can I say, I'm a dreamer, I'm a believer, I think miracles can happen.”

“Ugh,” said Johnny, and hey, at least he was still kind of conscious.

Daniel dragged him onward to the Avanti and then paused a critical moment beside it, letting the other boy's heavy frame slump over him, almost pinning him to the side of the car. He thought quick: gotta put something over the seats, Johnny'll kill me if blood gets on the leather.

Then he thought: Jesus, I've been spending too much time with this guy.

“Alright, in you go,” he grunted, hauling Johnny around while fumbling with the door with his free hand. Johnny wheeled through the air and nearly fell backwards. “No, no – good God, man, can you help here? Do I gotta do *everything*?”

He got Johnny down in the car, where he tipped forwards across the

seats. Daniel hurried around to get in the driver's side. He pushed ineffectually at the other boy's forehead but then gave up and let him rest against his shoulder. They needed to get out of here. How many minutes had it been? At least no one had followed them out the door.

He patted his own shorts like a dope for a couple seconds before reaching over to search the pockets of Johnny's jeans. The other boy didn't stir; bad? That seemed bad? Real fucking bad?

He found the keys and started the car, relief blooming with the roar of the engine. He threw the Avanti into reverse and peeled out of the lot. Skidding gravel.

The darkness of the road welcomed them in like the embrace of an old friend.

“Sit up, man,” he said, “Hey, sit up.”

Johnny was trying to lift his head, and mostly failing, and Daniel was *not* freaking out about it. The other boy was probably just drunk. He tried to remember how many beers he'd had, but he'd stopped counting after they started dancing. Dancing made people thirsty, and it seemed a hassle to monitor the situation when they were both having so much fun. Worst outcome, he remembered thinking, they'd have to sleep in the car in the parking lot.

The countryside was a flat dark expanse, only the barest glimmers of lights to the left and right, because no one actually seemed to live out here. He could see a faint glow in the sky ahead that had to be Amarillo. It would have a hospital, and it was only, what, twenty or thirty miles? He could make that, but he was kind of drunk himself and wary of going too fast. The panic over Johnny and worry over cops collided in his head, made him feel sick.

How could he have allowed this to happen? He was supposed to be the smart one.

He angled his head to the left out the side of the car, letting the night air blow in his face a little. Anything to wake up some more.

After a couple minutes, his pulse slowed – not a lot, but a little, enough that he didn't think he was going to have some kind of cardiac event in the middle of the highway. It was hard to panic too much on

a straight road. There was only one way to go; they were locked in, course set.

“This why you like it?” he asked Johnny, who made no reply. "'Cause it's easy, you don't gotta think?"

He tried then, as he had many times over the past couple days, to picture Johnny back in California, driving around every night by himself, his headlights eating blacktop through the long hours of the night. Did he find peace, doing this? Was it how Daniel felt doing the kata? Or was it something darker, tenser – was he running from something?

They'd made it ten miles when Johnny lifted his head, blinking and grimacing. He muttered, “Daniel?”

He swerved slightly, startled out of his thoughts. He hurriedly pulled over to the side of the road and turned in his seat to stare at the other boy. His hands felt frozen, clutching the steering wheel like it was a life saver.

“You did it, you actually woke up,” said Daniel, numb.

“What's going on?” asked Johnny, groggy. “Why you driving my car?”

“You actually fucking woke up,” he said again, and he knew he was starting to sound almost hysterical. “What's with you and this car, man? You have some kind of bond with it, is this Knight Rider?”

Johnny was silent, finally rolling his head away from him. He fell back against the other door, long legs sprawling and falling wide. Daniel thought he caught a strange gleam in his eyes, like they were wet.

“He's selling her,” said Johnny, words barely above a whisper.

Daniel wanted to check the back of his head, see if it was still bleeding. The words only penetrated after a few seconds. “What?”

“Sid. He says he's going to sell her.” Johnny tried lifting a hand to rub his face, and it took two tries before he gave up with a sigh. “He's taking her away, man. She's all I got, and he's taking her away.”

Daniel couldn't process this information, he didn't have the space or energy to deal with it just then. He put the car back into gear and eased back on the road. “Look, it's gonna be alright. Gonna get you to

the emergency room, get you patched up—”

“Don't be stupid,” he said thickly.

“I'm not,” said Daniel, edge creeping into his voice despite his better intentions. “*You* don't be stupid, if you can manage. I mean, you're bleeding from the head, barely coherent.”

Johnny reached up to probe the back of his head, wincing slightly at whatever he found. But still, he said, “It's fine. It's barely bleeding. Just a bump.”

“Bump, *bullshit*,” began Daniel, but Johnny's hand swung out across the seats in the darkness, landing on his leg and clamping down and the rest of Daniel's words dried up in his throat.

“Just find a motel or something. I'll ice it, get some sleep. It'll be fine.”

Daniel bit his tongue. He scowled out at the darkness but kept driving. They were locked in, after all: course set.

Chapter End Notes

driver gets the POV, yo

The Yellow Rose Inn, 1:05 AM

The first motel he found had no vacancy; the second had been seemingly abandoned by its night clerk, because he stood there for five minutes trying the desk bell to no avail. The third was the Yellow Rose Inn, and he almost didn't get a room there either because the old man in the office didn't believe he was eighteen.

“If you're just here for some hanky-panky with a sweet young thing, I'll have you know this is a family establishment. Go home, son. Pray to God.”

Now, Daniel considered himself a pretty friendly guy, but it was one o'clock in the morning, and the closest he had to something sweet and young was the surly headcase in the passenger seat. Instead of reaching across the desk and strangling the man, he smiled and said:

“I'm trying to get home, sir, but as you might be able to tell, that's some ways away. I can't drive anymore tonight, need to get some sleep.”

He ended up having to show his driver's license to convince him, but he got the room key.

“'S a single?” said Johnny as Daniel hauled him into the room. The other boy had progressed to staggering, so they were able to move more quickly, if not more steadily.

“Yeah, well, it was cheaper. And it's not like I'm getting any sleep tonight.”

The room was small but neat. Under the jaundiced cast of the side table lamp, it was hard to tell what color the walls were; it all looked yellow, but didn't make him think of any kind of rose. The bed was a full-sized mattress and a little creaky, but the sheets and blanket looked clean. From what he could see standing in the middle of the room, it didn't look like the bathroom had a tub, so: great.

Daniel lowered Johnny carefully onto the bed and went to get his bag from the car. He opened the trunk to grab a fresh shirt for the other boy, hesitated for a strange, speculative moment over the new blanket

he found there. Shook his head to clear it – he was probably still a little drunk, even if he didn't feel it anymore.

Back inside the room, it was time to face the music.

“Alright, man,” he said. “Let's take a look your head.”

Johnny was keeled over sideways on the end of the bed, resting on the unwounded side of his skull. At Daniel's words, his eyes cracked open and he glared blearily up at him.

“Don't look at me like that. I didn't smash your head in.”

“Wouldn't put it past you,” he said thickly. Daniel decided to ignore this.

Johnny did a lot of groaning as he dragged him back up and into the bathroom; Daniel hoped the theatrics meant he wasn't actually hurt too bad.

He'd been right with his suspicions regarding the tub, so he made Johnny sit on the closed lid of the toilet as he ran a towel under some warm water.

“I don't think its bleeding much anymore,” he said, carefully sponging around the wound. The blood stood out stark against the pale hair, left a gruesome trail that followed the curve of his skull, dripped down the tendons on the back of his neck and stained the collar of his shirt. But it was mostly dry by then. The cut itself was maybe an inch long, a shallow arc and not too deep. “The guy must've just clipped you with it. Damn lucky for you.”

“Told you,” said Johnny, sounding exhausted or maybe just drunk. He slumped forward and pressed his face against Daniel's stomach.

His wiping motion slowed and stopped. Daniel rested the hand with the towel along the back of the other boy's neck and looked down at his bowed head: the vulnerable jut of his shoulder blades, the damp-darkened tangle of his hair.

“We'll uh,” he said, throat a little tight. “We'll get some bandage or gauze or something tomorrow. I don't think anything's open right now. Could ask the man at the front desk, but he already thinks I'm some kind of beatnik or whatever. Also he'd charge us for a double if he knew you were here, so.”

Johnny mumbled something, and his stomach leaped a little beneath his mouth: ticklish.

“What was that?”

Johnny turned his face so his mouth was free and said, “Okay.”

“None of this is okay, man,” Daniel informed him. His hands were still on his shoulders, but if he just kept talking, it wouldn't be weird, he was sure of it. “I was supposed to be getting a good night's sleep tonight, remember? A hotel room with pillows and running water, it was going to be such a luxury. Now instead I'm going to be up all night making sure you don't pass away from a concussion. Here: arms up, your shirt's got blood on it.”

He helped drag the blood-stained shirt carefully over the other boy's head. When his face cleared, Johnny said, “Don't got a concussion.”

He hunched even worse without his shirt, squinting at his feet like the tile hurt his eyes. Daniel went into the other room to fetch a new shirt – the Arizona flag shirt from what felt like a week ago. When he got back, Johnny was shivering a little and looking generally very pitiful. Daniel suppressed a sigh; this was what a well-defined pelvic cut got you, he thought. No heat retention.

He helped Johnny into the fresh shirt, and Johnny let him, though his face was steadily darkening, cheeks stained red. The blush extended down his chest. He didn't rest his head against Daniel's stomach again.

Johnny was a handful; seemed like every time Daniel turned around, he was either falling asleep or on the move again. He'd looked after toddlers back in Jersey that were less trouble.

“No, hey – what're you doing, don't do that,” he said the third time he turned around and Johnny was wriggling like any army man across the bed to the side table. “You got a sudden burning urge to consult Gideon's Bible or something? Confess your sins? If you're seeing a light, do me a favor and don't go towards it.”

He kept up the talk as he pulled and pushed the other boy back onto the bed, barely even aware of what he was saying. But it made him feel better to fill the silence, and he figured any of the words seeped through to Johnny, well, so much the better. He needed to stay

awake. Daniel wasn't above annoying him into it.

“Here, look, I'll turn on the TV, okay? Think you can stay awake and watch something?” Daniel grabbed one of the pillows and put it at the end of the bed, and pushed him at it until Johnny's face twisted and he pushed back: twice as hard, of course.

Daniel shook his head and went over the small TV sitting against the wall. It had dials instead of buttons, and it took him forever to remember how to turn it on, let alone switch through the channels. Eventually he found TBS and some old black and white movie with Jimmy Stewart.

Rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand, he turned back to the bed. Johnny had shoved the pillow under his chin and his wrists under the pillow, and he was watching Daniel. Or, to be more accurate, he was staring into space while his brain swelled against the sides of his cranium.

“Think you can pay attention to the movie, or should I try to figure out the coffee maker?”

“I hate Jimmy Stewart,” said Johnny. “He's got a funny voice, like you.”

The shit he had to put up with. “I sound nothing like Jimmy Stewart. You're drunk and concussed and not exactly the sharpest tool in the tool shed when not those things, okay. Just – stay awake and watch the damn movie.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed, the mattress sinking and complaining. After a moment he leaned back on his elbows to peer at the other boy's head wound. Some part of him worried it was going to suddenly decided to split open again, just to fuck with Daniel's night even worse.

Johnny twitched and leaned away, sliding him a suspicious look. “Quit it.”

He raised his hands. “Okay, okay. Take it easy.”

They settled, Johnny on his stomach and blinking slowly at the TV, Daniel resting back on his wrists.

At some point, despite his best intentions, he fell asleep.

The Yellow Rose Inn, 9:05 AM

Daniel woke up curled on his side with a pair of truly *rancid* socked feet inches from his face. His nose wrinkled and he rolled away with a groan.

Once in the relative clear air, his surroundings started to come together, and he jolted upright on the bed. Shit. He fell asleep. *Shit.*

He looked around with dry, wild eyes, taking in the TV now playing Gilligan's Island on low volume, the sunlight pouring around the generous cracks in the motel curtains. The room was a deep, unfortunate yellow, some part of his brain noticed; so it hadn't just been the lighting last night.

He scrambled onto his knees and practically jumped on Johnny, hands turning him over and growing a little frantic when he just rolled onto his back like a dead log. “Johnny, Johnny. Wake up, man. Johnny, wake up. We fell asleep, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Johnny—”

A strong hand fisted in the front of his shirt and yanked him in close. A pair of malevolent blue eyes slitted open, and Daniel felt his own go wide.

“Daniel."

Despite the mortal danger he felt he might be in, he couldn't help but sigh a little in relief. “Oh, good. You're alive.”

“Do you have a hangover?” asked the other boy, barely above a whisper.

He thought about it, taking stock. His head ached a little, but he wasn't too worried about it. He met Johnny's eyes again and shook his head. “Nope.”

“If you don't stop shouting,” he said, “I'm going to give you one.”

He released Daniel's shirt and threw the arm over his eyes. Daniel hovered for a couple seconds longer, watching his grimace take shape.

“That didn't even make sense,” he said and sat back on his heels. His face felt a little warm, from the embarrassment of being worried over an undeserving jerk. He looked around at the bedside table and said, quietly so as to not provoke the sleeping troll, “Check-out's in like, an

hour.”

Johnny lifted his hips slightly and turned his head. He grunted, eyes closed, “Can't move. Can't drive.”

“I can drive,” Daniel pointed out absently, eyes on the other boy's rucked up shirt and the pale line of hair that ran down from his bellybutton and disappeared into his jeans. “Did it last night while your drunk ass bled all over the place.”

Johnny's arm thumped back down to his side, and he levered himself up on his elbows to squint up the bed at him. He looked like a corpse, almost: pale and sick, with bloodshot eyes and dry, chapped lips.

“You let me bleed on the leather seats?”

He stared at him, disbelief swelling by the second. When Johnny stubbornly continued to glare back, Daniel said slowly, “I'm going to get breakfast. If you're very lucky, I'll bring you something back. But like, don't count on it.”

“Whatever.” Johnny dropped back down and hauled the pillow over his face, like he might suffocate himself with it.

Daniel spent a couple seconds sending all manner of rude gestures at the tuft of straw sticking out from beneath the pillow, and then stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The Yellow Rose Inn, 9:40 AM

When he returned to the room half an hour later, he was ready for anything: for another round of arguing about who would drive or who was at fault for the blood on the seat (and he checked on the Avanti before going back, it was *fine*, only a few drops of blood all told; if Johnny was lucky, he might even share the good news with him). He wasn't prepared to walk inside and be confronted with such a portrait of human misery, all thoughts of vengeance or spite evaporated instantly.

Johnny had stripped off his jeans, and was curled up in a sweaty ball on the middle of the bed, one pillow under his head and another over it, like he was trying to block out the world.

Daniel sighed soundlessly and let the door close behind him. He kicked off his shoes and said quietly, “Uh, hey. Got you an egg sandwich.”

He wasn't sure the other boy heard or was even awake, but after many long seconds he muttered, “Be sick if I eat.”

Daniel walked over to the bed and dared lift up the top pillow. A red-faced Johnny peered up at him pathetically, and he braced himself against the sight. This guy could be a serious asshole, he reminded himself. Never forget.

“Think you'll be able to get out of here in the next twenty minutes?” he asked.

“My head hurts.” He shut his eyes and groped blindly for the pillow in Daniel's hand.

He sighed and dropped it back over his face.

“I'm starting to think you were right, and it's not a concussion,” he said, voice pitched low as he could make it go. He crouched down beside the bed and carefully tipped the edge of the pillow up from the back of Johnny's head to get a look at the cut. It was scabbed over, and a little raised. He put the pads of his fingers against the bump, barely brushing it, and Johnny flinched slightly. The dots of his spine pressed against the thin material of his shirt as he curled in on himself.

A serious asshole, Daniel thought again with great determination. He rested his chin on his forearms and considered the situation.

“Guess we're staying another night,” he said finally, standing. “I'll go tell the manager, get you some ice.”

And a “thanks” might've been muttered behind him as he left the room, but neither of them would ever acknowledge it.

It was a woman at the front desk that morning, and she was full of smiles and chatter. She called him *Hon* and poured him a cup of coffee as he paid for the second night. He explained his friend was sick and had bumped his head in the shower, and she handed over a small first aid kit and directed him to the ice machine down the alley between the main office and the rooms.

He returned to the room bearing a small trove of treasure, or that's kinda what it felt like, anyway.

“Okay,” he said as he kicked the door softly closed behind him. “I've got aspirin and ice, and a little box full of other medical junk we should at least look at. Like, ointment for the cut and stuff.”

Johnny's arm dropped off the side of the bed and his hand opened and closed in the air. “Aspirin. Please,” he added, and that was weird enough that Daniel handed the bottle over immediately.

“Hang on, don't swallow those dry,” he said, crossing over to the bathroom to fill a cup with water. He returned to the bed and stuck it in Johnny's face. “You're probably really dehydrated. Drink up.”

Johnny didn't argue. He sat up and took the cup, and it was both gratifying and disconcerting.

Deciding to take advantage of this new spirit of cooperation, Daniel said, “How about we bandage that cut?”

Johnny scratched his balls and frowned at the floor. “Do we have to? I mean, it stopped bleeding, didn't it?” He transferred his bleary gaze to Daniel, who looked back at him, completely unimpressed with this reasoning. Johnny's shoulders slumped. “Right.”

So he made the other boy sit still as he carefully dabbed the ointment from the first aid kit over the cut. They both looked through the assortment of small bandages meant for finger cuts and scrapes. Daniel finally pulled out a roll of gauze.

Johnny, perched on the edge of the bed with his arms curled around his stomach, made a face. “Oh, c'mon,” he said. “No.”

“It's the only thing in here that'll work.”

“I'm not walking around with that wrapped around my head like some kind of nutjob. Forget it.”

Daniel stared at him, gauze in hand.

Johnny glanced at him and away again. He rubbed the tops of his bare thighs and bit his cheek. His feet shifted over the carpet, toes flexing.

Daniel kept staring.

“Jesus, Nurse Ratched,” he snapped finally. “Okay, *okay*. Just – get it over with.”

Daniel rose up on his knees. He pinned the end of the gauze to the other boy's forehead with his index finger and began to carefully unroll it around his head.

“Surprised you read that book,” he said, neutral.

“Assigned reading, tenth grade English,” came the sulky reply.

The Yellow Rose Inn, Noon

After bandaging his head and making him drink some more water, Daniel was a little at a loss about what to do; it was the middle of the day and they weren't going anywhere.

He returned the first aid kit and asked after laundry, and the woman at the desk directed him to a room at the far end of the building. So he tossed their clothes from the previous day in a machine and then stood kicking his heels for a couple minutes before giving up and returning to the room.

The sun was high over head by then, and the mercury had to be past ninety. Maybe it was just as well they weren't driving anywhere, he thought.

Johnny was stretched out on his front on the bed, pillow shoved under his chin and eyes fixed on the TV. He'd taken his shirt off; if he kept up this trend, Daniel was in for an eyeful next time he left the room.

“Hot in here. Why didn't you turn on the air conditioner?” he asked, kicking off his shoes again.

“What air conditioner,” said Johnny, not looking away from the screen.

Daniel looked at the machine by the window and noticed for the first time that it was just a fan unit. “What the hell kind of motel in Texas doesn't have air conditioning?”

“You chose it, man.”

Daniel bit back a response. It was too hot for arguing, he thought, knowing if they start up again it'd only escalate. He glanced darkly at the other boy and stripped off his outer flannel.

“What're we watching?” he asked, flopping on the mattress. Johnny grunted and made room for him by shifting over a couple incredibly generous inches. He was like the sheepdog puppy his uncle once had that would pass out on its side in the middle of the kitchen; every time he had to step over it, Uncle Louie would say, *that dog knows it's gonna be big someday.*

“Laverne and Shirley reruns,” said Johnny. He glanced at him from

the corner of his eyes. “We can change it, if you want.”

“Nah, love that show. My ma and me used to watch it all the time back home.”

Johnny chewed on that for a second before saying, “Yeah. Mine too. I mean, we did.”

“I swear the first apartment I remember living in was exactly like the one in the show, maybe a little smaller. Loudmouth neighbors to shout at and all.”

“Ours wasn't in a basement, but – yeah.” Daniel shifted up on his elbows and gave him a look. Johnny squinted back. “*What*?”

“You expect me to believe you lived like that? You? Mr. Avanti, Hero of the Hills—”

“My mom wasn't always married to my stepdad, dick.” Johnny switched his attention back to the TV and pointedly raised the volume, until the room was full of the comforting noise of the girls' arguing.

Daniel rolled his eyes and slumped back down. After a second he poked his head over the side of the bed and grabbed the second pillow that had fallen down.

“Shirley's got the right attitude for life, I mean, she's gonna go far. Positive outlook, that's the key, man. She's always thinking about how to improve herself, her life—”

“What's to improve?” said Johnny. “Laverne knows how life works. She's not afraid to throw a fist, she takes no shit.”

“That's what you like in a girl, *really*?”

“What's with the tone?”

“Just saying, if that's what you're looking for, you might find it hard to find somebody, Johnny. I mean, for a guy who keep shoveling the stuff.”

He shoved him off the bed, but Daniel was like a cat and landed on all fours. He sent him a triumphant look and Johnny shook his head.

“Laverne's got the cuter voice,” he said and Daniel's smirk dropped.

“You kidding me?”

“What, you don't agree? I mean, Shirley, is that what people in Milwaukee sound like? What is that? It's nothing. She could be from anywhere.”

“Laverne's Italian.”

“So what?”

“*I*'m Italian.”

“You're a twerp. Now shut up, you're making my head hurt.”

“Did you say you got me an egg sandwich?”

Daniel tilted his chin over the pillow. “Hm? Yeah. Hours ago. It's over by the door.”

“Grab it, will you.”

His face twisted. “You grab it, you're closer.”

“I can't, what if I've got a concussion?” asked Johnny. “I might get dizzy and fall if I try to stand.”

“You don't get to play the concussion card now. What, you think I'm an easy mark? You think just because I'm a decent person, and show a little concern for another human being, I'll just fall over myself to wait on you hand and foot? You think—”

“Oh my god,” said Johnny, burying his head beneath his pillow. “I swear I'll never think another thing so long as I live.”

But Daniel was already halfway up off the bed. “You want some more water too?”

Eventually he remembered the laundry and went to switch the load into the dryer. He paused outside the door to the room, feeling oddly

apprehensive. Then he got over himself and went back inside, where Johnny was where he left him, as he left him, that is: mostly, but thankfully not entirely, naked.

“Think we should get some beers?” he asked, oblivious to Daniel's relief. “I don't think I've ever stayed in a hotel without drinking before.”

“No beer,” said Daniel, walking past his sprawling form to the bathroom.

“It could be medicinal,” Johnny called after him. "Haven't you ever heard of hair of the dog?"

The Yellow Rose Inn, 4 PM

It got so hot by the late afternoon, they ended up propping the room door open, and even then Daniel still felt like his brain was in a slow cooker. He made two separate trips for ice and stopped by the vending machines to buy them each a soda; Johnny didn't even drink his at first, but pressed the can to the front his face and rolled it across his forehead.

The curve of Johnny's back shined with sweat, and his boxers were damp with it, sticking to his skin; he was probably getting his smell all over the bed sheets.

Daniel sat in the open doorway and drank his soda and thought resentfully about corner-cutting hoteliers. He didn't think the prevalence of motels across the country advertising air conditioning meant one shouldn't be able to count on it in the absence of a declaration. It was like walking into a store and finding milk sitting out unrefrigerated or something. One shouldn't have to specify.

“I should take a cold shower,” he said, and then didn't move. It was so *hot*. Wasn't it September?

“Remember when I almost got heat stroke like a week ago?” said Johnny from the bed.

“That was two days ago.”

“This feels worse,” he continued, ignoring him.

“So you admit it was heat stroke,” said Daniel, because it seemed worth mentioning. He was pretty sure they argued about that at the time.

Johnny sighed and rolled onto his back, letting his head hang from the end of bed. His boxers were definitely sticking to his skin, the soft bump of his dick.

Daniel tipped his soda back but found he'd already finished it. His fingers dented the can. He squinted out at the sun-drenched parking lot. The air over the cars was liquid and hazy with the heat.

Behind him in the room, he heard Johnny roll off the bed and thump onto the carpet. He didn't turn to look. He was probably fine.

“What if we sat in the Avanti,” he said, words directed out of the room. “I mean, we could. We could put up the top, roll up the windows—”

“So long as we write goodbye notes to our moms first, sure, we could do that.” Johnny was closer, over by the table – he was grabbing the ice bucket.

“No, I mean.” Daniel's eyes felt like they were coated in tar as he blinked and tried to organize his thoughts. “Look: the car has air conditioning, right? We could sit in the car. Run the air conditioning. Just for like, an hour or something.”

Johnny crawled over to the door and sat up along the other side of it. He had a couple ice cubes in hand and was running them along his pink face. The bandage around his head looked like some kind of parody of his usual karate headband; between that and the flush he looked ridiculous as he squinted at Daniel.

“You want to sit in my car and idle the engine for an hour,” he said slowly, “in this heat?”

“Yeah.”

“I'd rather we both got heat stroke and passed out.”

Daniel let his head fall back against the door frame. Gave it a good solid *thunk*. Maybe if he gave himself brain damage like Johnny, he wouldn't mind the heat so much.

Johnny looked out at the parking and absently brought his knees up. The hem of his boxers fell, gaping over the high curve of his thighs.

Daniel closed his eyes and dreamed of the Avanti.

The Yellow Rose Inn, 7 PM

Johnny sulked over Daniel's hard stance on alcohol for the rest of the evening, at one point even threatening to go out himself to buy some.

“You going to show up under age and mostly naked, with a bandage around your head? Good luck with that,” said Daniel, dealing out the pack of cards around the small table. He had a faint headache himself from the heat, and was in no mood to deal with Johnny's crap.

“I can put on pants,” said Johnny. Can you? thought Daniel, frowning at his cards. “And I can take this off—”

“Touch that bandage, and I'll put sugar in the Avanti's gas tank,” he threatened, looking up sharply just as the other boy began to probe the edges of the gauze with his fingers. “Don't test me, man. I can get a Greyhound from here. It's nothing to me.”

Johnny dropped his hands and collapsed in the chair across from Daniel. “This is bullshit.” He swiped up his hand of cards. “What are we playing?”

Daniel relaxed back in his chair a little. “Twenty-one.”

He squinted suspiciously. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Depends on how badly you play, I guess.”

The problem was, Johnny was mostly recovered from his hangover, and he didn't like sitting still for long periods of time. The car, apparently, did not count as sitting still.

As the sun set and the worst of the heat abated, Johnny grew restless and Daniel grew wary.

They had the radio on the bedside clock playing, and it was filling the room with a quiet background drone of old country music, Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, names he wouldn't know if the guy on the radio wasn't sharing them in between sets.

Daniel had his chin in his palm and was looking at his hand of cards – they'd resorted to Go Fish, they were that bored – when Johnny said suddenly and, in retrospect, inevitably:

“Hey, why don't we spar?”

He flicked his eyes up but otherwise remained motionless. “No,” he said.

But Johnny's knee was already bouncing with the idea, he was determined. “Why not?”

“We fought a bunch of guys literally last night, what do you think?”

“So don't hit me in the head with a bottle, that's not hard.”

“I don't want to hit you at all,” said Daniel, and for some reason this surprised Johnny; he could see it in how his head went back and his eyes widened a little. This made Daniel feel very tired. He wondered if Johnny understood any other way of being, of touching a person. He added quickly, “I don't think you should be doing any kind of rigorous physical activity,” because that sounded like something a doctor might say.

He had no internal explanation for why his cheeks went hot after he said it, though.

“Well, I can't play this anymore,” said Johnny. He stood and tossed the cards down; he'd had the Queen Daniel needed, damn it. “I'm going out of my mind."

He started to wander the room. Wandering turned to pacing. Daniel scraped the pack of cards back together, and watched him.

“I could, um,” he said, and stopped again, feeling uncertain and sore; the same way he felt every time he thought of something that reminded him of Mr. Miyagi still over in Okinawa.

But Johnny was too bored not to notice. He turned in place. “What?”

Daniel looked away, out the window, even though he couldn't see much with the lights of the room on behind him. He only ended up staring at his own reflection, this kid who got stupid when he was lonely, who was too quick to give up pieces of himself.

“I could teach you a kata,” he said.

It was, perhaps, an objectively bad idea; karate had never been anything but a source of conflict between the two of them. It was a miracle they'd made it as far from California as they had without it really coming up. Johnny used karate to fight, and Daniel had spent a year trying very hard to learn not to. Their styles were not compatible. Their ethos, their *goals* – none of it was the same, and trying to bridge that gap was likely going to result in trouble or frustration.

But Johnny said, “Okay.”

The Yellow Rose Inn, 9 PM

They tried to clear a space in the small room by moving the table into the corner and shoving the bed against the wall, but Johnny still couldn't swing his leg without hitting either the wall or the bed, so they took it outside. This meant he had to pull on his shirt and jeans, so Daniel wasn't exactly complaining.

They stood facing each other in an empty parking stall in front of the room, the walkway lighting buzzing over head behind Daniel. Past nine on whatever day of the week it was, and the neighborhood was dark and deader than dead. Hopefully no one would take any notice of two boys doing karate in the parking lot. Not that it mattered.

He didn't know what he expected from Johnny as a student, but it wasn't what he got. The other boy stood loose but still before him, eyes attentive and present. Figured he'd behave for karate before anything else, thought Daniel. He tried not to feel destabilized by the close, expectant attention.

It was both too great a reminder of the last time they faced off, and nothing at all like it. Daniel wasn't desperate and in pain; Johnny didn't look like his whole life was slipping through his fingers.

He cleared his throat and muttered *just one sec* and closed his eyes to visualize the kata, how it felt to go through the motions; what Mr. Miyagi looked like when he did them.

When he opened his eyes again, Johnny was waiting patiently, expression quiet. Like he understood. And maybe he did, because once Daniel met his eyes, they bowed to each other without saying a word.

They fell back into a ready stance, and Daniel said, “So just – clear your mind, breathe with the motion where it feels right, and follow my lead. I'll go slow.”

Once he started, the weight of Johnny's gaze stopped feeling so heavy. It became part of kata, almost; he breathed and waited for a reflection of his body's movement; he breathed and waited for his partner to follow.

They went through the steps over the cracked concrete, silent but for their breathing. Late season mosquitoes whined in the air past them, but were easily ignored.

On the sixth repetition, Daniel felt something change.

It was as if Johnny had been puzzling over the kata somewhere in the back of his mind, and he finally unlocked some base logic to the steps. He relaxed into it, the transitions when liquid, and together they flowed through the full kata in near unison.

They arrived back in the ready position, both breathing a little hard, eyes fighting the thrill. They bowed again.

“Not bad for a first run,” said Daniel with a slight, helpless grin when they straightened up again. Johnny's mouth curled in response, and he shook his head, looking away across the parking lot. “What? What's with the face?”

Johnny brushed past him and said only, “You realize I'm going to make you do that every day now, right?”

Daniel took that in. He let him go back inside the room, deciding he needed the fresh air more than he needed those four claustrophobic yellow walls just then. His heart felt overly full, unsteady with it.

Wish you could've seen that, Mr. Miyagi, he thought. *It felt kind of beautiful.*

The Yellow Rose Inn, 11 PM

Johnny was in the shower when he came back into the room, and in his typical oblivious way, he'd left the door half open. Was it a jock thing? he wondered. Or did Daniel need to find some kind of nature documentary on primates to work this thing out. Maybe this was Johnny's subconscious trying to establish dominance. Good luck with that, buddy.

He leaned against the frame of the bathroom and called over the patter of the shower, “Be careful with that bandage, you better not be getting it wet.” And when Johnny made no response, he added, “I don't want to have to go get the first aid kit to put another one on. The man who handles nights doesn't like me nearly as much as the day lady.” He thought about that. “Hell, he'd probably get suspicious if I asked for the first aid. He'd insist on doing some kind of, of room inspection maybe. Then you'd either have to hide under the bed or we'd get caught and have to pay double. And I don't want to pay double for one bed, man, I've already dropped a ton of money on this whole little adventure—”

At some point the shower must've turned off because suddenly Johnny was in the doorway, knotting a towel around his hips and shaking his head like he could clear out the water from his ear canal, or maybe just Daniel's voice. His chest was wet from the shower.

“What, you don't know how to use a towel, or something,” said Daniel, and then almost bit his tongue, because he knew enough to know it was weird to mention it.

And sure enough, Johnny gave him a baffled look that verged on hostile. “It's still like 85 degrees in here, give me a break. Shower's open, by the way,” he said, turning away to sit on the bed. He reached for the remote. “And you should take one, it's a miracle this room doesn't reek from the two of us from today.”

“Speak for yourself, I smell like roses.” Though when he went in to the bathroom – closing the door firmly, thanks – he lifted the neck of his tank and took a ginger sniff. And okay, it wasn't great.

He took his shower at light speed, scrubbing what needed to be scrubbed and mind jumping frenetically from topic to topic; he wasn't dumb, he knew what was happening with him. But he thought if he could just keep moving, keep talking, he might be able to distract

them both from it.

Speaking of distraction: he hadn't brought a change of clothing into the bathroom.

“Oh, that's just perfect,” he muttered. “Real top-notch work, there, LaRusso.”

He brushed his teeth and pulled his boxers back on and squared his shoulders like someone walking out to face a rifle squad.

But the lights were off in the room. Johnny was already in bed on his front, under the sheet. The blanket was in a pile on the floor, and the fan unit was turned on as high as it would go, a loud rattle over by the window.

Neither of them said anything as Daniel crawled onto the other side of the bed, in between Johnny and the wall – they should've shoved the bed back into its original position, but he wasn't about to insist on it right then.

He was ninety percent sure Johnny was still awake, and he thought about saying something to break the silence, but for once his mind was a complete blank, like it was sitting back and recording every creak of the springs or the pale fall of Johnny's hair on the pillowcase.

It was a while before Daniel fell asleep.

Amarillo to Conway

His mind rose slowly out of a formless dream of the wind whistling past him in the Avanti, a sound that resolved into the racket from the window fan a few feet away.

He breathed deep and turned his head and pulled at the hand gently shaking his shoulder until its owner tumbled down on the bed into his proper place. He stretched and relaxed back around him, arm tucking him safe and close, and then Johnny registered the stiffness of the shoulder under his chin; the jeans against his bare thighs and dick—

“Shit,” he said, and rolled away. He scrubbed his face and flipped the sheet over his lap. He'd kicked off his boxers in the night. “Shit, sorry.”

“S'okay,” said Daniel, quickly getting off the bed. He didn't look around at him. “You're pretty brain dead in the mornings. I've noticed.”

He took a breath. “Yeah.”

He sat there, blinking dumbly down at the bed for a couple seconds, waiting for the chilling shockwave to fade. He couldn't believe his instincts would betray him like that. Indefensible.

“Of course – it's kind of hard to tell the difference, you being dumb in the mornings and you the rest of the time.”

The words penetrated his fog of mortification. He breathed a laugh out through his nose and aimed a squint up at Daniel, who looked a little nervous but was trying to grin at him. As far as olive branches went, it was barely a twig, but Johnny would take it.

Anything to keep moving forward.

Daniel went to get fruit or whatever from the continental breakfast the motel put out while Johnny took another shower and jerked off and tried to get his head on right. It was hard with the stupid bandage still around his forehead, but he wasn't going to let that stop him from trying.

He was safely back in his jeans when Daniel came in and set the tray down on the table they'd shoved in the corner the previous night. He had his mouth full of muffin, which he mumbled around. Johnny didn't understand a word he said, but he understood the shirt launched at his head the next moment.

He pulled it off his face and looked down at the scrap of fabric; it was a cream-colored western-style shirt with pearl clasps and brown embroidery along the shoulders. He made a confused face at it. “What is this?”

Daniel swallowed his muffin and said, “You know the mustache you kicked in the balls? I took it off his bar stool. Figured – well, you need more clothes, right? And it's kinda like a trophy.”

Johnny hid how much he liked the sound of that. He raised it up and took a careful sniff.

“I washed it yesterday,” said Daniel, a little exasperated.

“You did laundry yesterday?”

“The thanks I get,” muttered Daniel, turning back to the food.

Johnny pulled the shirt on over his shoulders; it fit, more or less, though it was a little long in the sleeves. He started buttoning it up.

“How far do you think we'll get today?” asked Daniel, not looking around.

“I don't know, but we're getting the fuck out of Texas, that's for sure.”

He reached past the other boy for a muffin and tried not to notice how he tensed a little. Johnny veered away with his spoils and settled on the end of the bed. The muffin was probably supposed to be apple cinnamon or something, but it tasted like cardboard.

They were silent for a while, eating and not quite not-looking at each other. Johnny couldn't wait to get back on the road. He was so sick of this little room.

“How's your head?” asked Daniel. “You think you're good to drive?”

He'd already grabbed the keys from the table, and now twirled the ring around his finger to show him. “Try and stop me.”

He hadn't really been awake when they drove into Amarillo, and his complete lack of an impression didn't change much as they drove out of the city.

The cut still hurt faintly, a dull ache whenever he rested back against the seat, so he kept his head forward and sunglasses on and the talking to a minimum. This seemed to suit Daniel fine, at least at first. The other boy kept his own gaze out the window, chewing on his lip.

When they were finally back on the highway and at speed, he felt the tightness that had descended the moment he pushed the other boy away on the bed let up. He must've sighed or something, because Daniel glanced over. After a second of taking in Johnny's easy sprawl, he laughed a little.

“You're really something, you know that?” he said. “Like, maybe you should become a long haul trucker. Never have to leave the road that way.”

“Yeah, but then I wouldn't be driving the Avanti. It wouldn't be the same,” he said.

“There are other cars, man.” Daniel's tone was odd, off.

He tapped the steering wheel. “Sure. But this one's mine.”

It was nothing he hadn't said before, but for some reason, this time it made Daniel's smile fade.

Conway to Shamrock

Because there was nothing to look at on the highway, just flat farmland as far as the eye could see, Johnny found himself thinking about the kata again.

He hadn't trained in months. And it wasn't that he forgot how it felt to feel that level of focus, of being perfectly present, but some part of him thought he'd lost the ability. Was afraid that if he tried to take karate up again, returned to that place within himself – maybe it'd be gone. Missing. Like Sensei took it with him on his way out of Johnny's life.

But last night it was right there waiting for him. And today he felt clear-headed despite the bump on the back of his skull. He felt lighter. He felt *good*.

He wondered how often Daniel trained. He was apparently really close with his sensei, so he must still do it regularly. Maybe that was why he was so antsy about the man being over in Okinawa. Out of the tournament circuit and without a dojo, a karate student is just some guy who happens to be able to do a high kick. If you weren't careful, he thought, karate could become just one of those things you did as a kid, like piano lessons or boy scouts or some shit. From routine to hobby to a memory. It was a short road.

“Hey, can I ask you something,” he said. He frowned as Daniel jolted a little in his seat and looked around, spooked.

Daniel flapped a hand. “Look, if it's about this morning, its okay. Really. We don't gotta—”

“What?” Johnny glanced over, confused. “What about this – oh. That.” That thing he wasn't thinking about. Thanks, LaRusso. “No, man, I'm talking about karate.”

Daniel's eyebrows went up and he sort of laughed and nodded, that dorky thing he did when he was talking to himself, like Johnny wasn't two feet away and in possession of working ears.

“Of course. Of course you're talking about karate,” he muttered.

“Look, you got a problem?” he demanded, shifting aggressively over the seat. “Do *you* want to talk about this morning?”

“No problem. Why would I?”

“Because apparently it's on your mind. If this is something you're going to sit and stew over for the next five hundred miles before blowing up at me, I'd like to get it over with.” Heat was creeping up his neck. It wasn't fair, holding something he did half-asleep against a guy. It wasn't *fair*.

“I don't have a problem,” said Daniel loudly, throwing his hands up. “Forget it!”

“I already had,” he pointed out. He shook his head and looked back to the road.

“*Jesus*,” they said in unison.

They passed a bright green billboard inviting them to come to Shamrock and kiss some stone to win everlasting good luck. They both wrinkled their noses.

“Wait, what was your question about karate?” asked Daniel a few minutes later.

Shamrock to Canute

“...so anyway, day of the fight, and I'm real nervous but Mr. Miyagi, he's cool as ever. Don't think he knows the meaning of fear. And he's not happy about having to fight, but the village is guaranteed no matter what, and I think he was pretty satisfied with that. Even if it meant having to fight his best friend. But they don't actually end up fighting, because this crazy storm hits – a typhoon, California doesn't get those, does it?”

“No, don't think so,” said Johnny.

“Anyway, this thing was scary. I mean, *scary*. It was whipping trees around like they were toothpicks, crushing buildings left and right. Worst thing I've ever been in. We ran to the storm shelter with the rest of the village, but Sato doesn't show up – he was over in his dojo when the storm hit, and the whole building got flattened with him inside. Crazy, right?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

“So Mr. Miyagi and me, we run over to help get him out. Whole time, Sato's cursing Mr. Miyagi, going like, oh, of course you're trying to end it now, bet you're real happy, you coward, you were always such a coward, and of course Mr. Miyagi, he's such a good person, he's just ignoring all this. Because he's the better man, right, he's just focused on trying to get Sato free. Which we do, and that shuts Sato up pretty good.

“So we get him back to the shelter with everybody else, then there's this whole thing with a little girl that I won't go into, she's stuck up this pole, whatever – but anyway, Sato ends up disowning Chozen on the spot, right there, in front of everybody. I mean, *everybody*. And the next day Sato agrees to hold the O-bon festival in the old castle, so things are looking pretty good for the village.

"And next thing you know, I'm at this cool festival, and I'm having a pretty good time! I'm learning some dance moves, making friends, and then the ceremony starts and Kumiko's doing her thing – looking amazing doing it, by the way, she's gonna go far, I'm telling you – but then bam! Chozen ziplines down into the castle in the middle of her dance.”

“He. Ziplines down,” said Johnny, checking.

“Yeah, don't know why he didn't just walk in, the door was open. But anyway, he's like. Crazy. He takes Kumiko hostage. I mean he holds an actual knife to her throat, man.”

“I don't. Are there no cops in Okinawa, or—”

“*Anyway*, so he's all, fight me or I'm gonna kill her!”

“What.”

“And everybody's just standing there watching, nobody's doing anything. Nobody *can* do anything because like I said, he's got a knife to her throat. So I'm like, okay, guess we're doing this. And Mr. Miyagi stops me, saying, y'know – this isn't a tournament, Daniel-san, it's for real. Like I didn't get that from the whole – it bears repeating – *knife* to her *throat*.

“Anyway, so I cross over to the center. He makes me dump the bridge and then, uh. Then we fought, and I won.”

The hard prairie wind blew over the Avanti. Johnny blinked at his gauges for a few seconds before realizing the other boy had finished with the story. His face twisted.

“What do you mean, 'we fought and I won'?” he demanded.

“What d'you mean, what'd I mean? What I just said.”

“That's *it*?” he said, with stark, rising disbelief. “You finally get to the good part and you just stop? You mean to tell me I had to sit through a forty minute blow-by-blow recounting of your sensei's soap opera-ass life and loving descriptions of your girlfriend's hair and Chozen's flashy shirts, and then you finally get to the fucking fight, and you *stop*?”

The other boy threw up a hand, offended. “Well, excuse me for trying to be modest.”

He felt like he was going to have seizure.

After a moment, Daniel said, “You know your mouth's hanging open, right. Like, you're aware of that. You're gonna swallow a bug or something if you're not careful.”

Johnny shut his mouth. He thought about it and said eventually, “You know, if you didn't want to tell me about it, you could've just said.

You didn't have to spin that whole ridiculous tale."

Daniel sat up like he'd been electrified. "What, you don't believe me?"

"Not a fucking word. Are you kidding?" Johnny shook his head and looked back at the road. "Fight to the death in a castle to save a babe. Give me a break. Where'd you get that plot, the arcade?"

Canute to El Reno

Daniel basically refused to talk to him for the next seventy miles, which: whatever. Wasn't great, but they'd gone longer in silence and he was pretty sure this wasn't like the other day when he was genuinely pissed at him. He was just being jumpy and weird, the way he'd been all day. And *that* got filed under not thinking about it, so Johnny drove on.

The thing about being kicked out of the house for liking dick was, a certain numbness lingered. It was hard to get worked up about something that already felt final, decided. It was what it was. Maybe Daniel suspected something, maybe he didn't. Whatever.

“So why'd he stay, then,” he asked eventually, when he got sick of the sight of the unchanging flat, brown landscape and Daniel's pensive frown.

He stirred, looked around. “What?”

“Your sensei. I'm assuming that part of the story is true, at least. Him and that lady – Yukie?”

“It was *all* true,” he said, sounding annoyed, but only half-heartedly so. “But yeah, he stayed back to be with her. For a while, he said.”

“What's 'a while'?”

“Beats me.”

Something about his attitude bothered him. “Well, why doesn't she just move here?”

“I don't know,” said Daniel with an edge to his voice.

“You don't know much, huh,” he said, and yeah, maybe he was being a dick about it, but he didn't know what else to be when Daniel acted like this. Defeat didn't suit him. Hearing him sound so passive only made Johnny want to goad and shove, get a response.

Daniel turned in his seat, looking almost baffled beneath his irritation. “What's your problem?”

“No problem. Just didn't realize you only push back when something doesn't matter to you, and not when it counts.”

“It's so like you to think about it like that. Not everything is a fight. Some things you don't push.”

Johnny put his elbow out the side and stretched his other behind the seats; steered with his fingertips. “Yeah. You know, people say that, but I'm not convinced.”

Daniel shook his head and stared out at the passing wheat fields. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

A couple days ago, Johnny would've dropped it. Today, for some reason, he sat up a little and said, “Look, you want your sensei to come back, right?”

He looked at him from the corner of his eyes, not turning his head. His reply was grudging. “Yeah. Of course.”

“So why not just tell him? Man up and take what you want.”

“He could have a whole life over there,” argued Daniel, and it was like he was really trying to convince Johnny, like it was vitally important that he get him to agree that it was all for the best if Daniel wandered forward through life without his sensei. “I mean, he's got Yukie, and now he's patched things up with Sato. I'm not gonna stand over here and whine into a phone like some little kid, demand he give all that up just for me.”

“God, you sound like such a pussy.”

“Aw, what do you know about it? You don't even have a sensei anymore.”

He wanted to slap him upside the head. “*Exactly*, I don't. And you're expecting me to just sit here and listen to you moan about letting yours go and – what? You're expecting sympathy from me?"

“I don't expect anything from you,” said Daniel darkly.

Johnny glanced at a passing billboard. “...You want to stop for burgers or something?”

“Yeah, sure.”

El Reno to Yukon

The wind seemed to follow them off the highway, blowing hot and strong at their backs as they rolled down the wide main drag. They snagged a diagonal parking spot in front of a small diner that was advertising itself as home to the fried onion burger.

“Oh, the car's gonna smell great after this,” muttered Daniel, getting out.

“We have the top down, you'll survive.”

The diner was the kind of hole-in-the-wall place that had no decor beyond grease stains and half-full ashtrays on all the tables; there were only like five things on the menu, so Johnny figured it was probably pretty good. And despite the prissy attitude, Daniel ordered one of the house special burgers for himself.

He stood at the counter fumbling with his wallet for a few seconds before Johnny rolled his eyes and elbowed him to the side.

“I've got his,” he said to the kid at the till.

“You don't have to do that,” said Daniel.

“You paid for the room, didn't you?” he said, pitching his voice low because out of context it sounded – well. “How much cash do you even have left on you?”

“Hey, I've got enough. What about you? You said, y'know. That thing about the card.” His voice sounded strange, and he wasn't quite looking at him.

“Think I can buy you a burger without breaking the bank. You want a shake or something?”

“No – well.” Daniel blinked up at the little plastic lettering of the menu. “Oh, hey, they have root beer floats.”

“One root beer float,” said Johnny. “And uh, a Coke.”

“What kind?” asked the kid.

He squinted. “Regular?”

Giving the kid one last suspicious look, he tossed a five dollar bill down and went to snag a table in the middle of the room. Daniel wandered over a minute later with a newspaper in one hand and a stack of napkins in the other, and Johnny kicked out the other chair for him.

“You know they cover rodeos around here like they're the super bowl?” said Daniel, sitting and flipping through the paper. “A lot of the cowboys got nicknames. Do you think they pick their own, or do they have to earn them? Buckshot Bill. Prairie Dog Sayers. Powder Keg Wilson. Hey, some of these are kinda mean, I don't think they'd choose them. Listen to this one – Hatchet Face Pulley, the top roper and dogger in the Panhandle. I can guess what a roper is, but what's a dogger?”

Johnny tore the paper off the end of his straw, put it to his lips and blew the wrapper in Daniel's face.

Daniel reached down and crumpled it, tossed it back at him without looking up from the paper.

“Should we go to a rodeo?” wondered Daniel.

At a gas station a little later, the woman behind the counter complimented the Avanti and told him to keep an eye on the weather.

“Be shame to see that pretty car get dinged up,” she said and it almost sounded like a threat.

Daniel, over by the postcards, glanced at Johnny's face and looked away again, biting back a grin.

“What do you mean, what's happening with the weather?” Johnny demanded. The sky outside was a perfect blue, blemish-free. Aside from the wind scattering dust over his paint job, he hadn't spared a thought about needing to worry.

“Hon, the hot weather we've been having the past few days? Them's storm conditions.”

“There isn't a single cloud in the sky,” he said.

She gave him an arch look. “Are you arguing with me?”

“Excuse him,” said Daniel, smoothly interceding before Johnny can get a fist in the lady's apron and demand what she knows. He patted Johnny's chest and pushed at his shoulder until he started to back up. “He's a mental patient, just got out of the hospital – he's still a little delicate from the whole ordeal.”

Johnny twisted out of his hold. “Real funny.”

They got back in the car and Johnny put his head up, staring hard at the sky.

Daniel shook his head and buckled up. “C'mon man, like you said – there's nothing there. The lady was just making small talk. Weather's probably the only thing they have to talk about around here. Well, that and Hatchet Face Pulley's dogging.”

Yukon to Stroud

Johnny remembered the sunscreen once they were back on the road, and reached over to get it from the glove compartment.

Daniel startled and pressed back minutely against his seat, and the part of Johnny that still had the instincts to look for weakness, that part of him that could smell fear on a school bus and automatically reached to slap books from unsuspecting kids' hands – that part of him went still.

You're scared of me? went the thought, followed closely by *how dare you be scared of me*, which quickly turned into *I guess I might as well live up to your expectations, make sure you know you were right to be afraid.* No one ever said these thoughts made sense.

He turned and looked at Daniel deliberately as he shut the glove compartment. He was slow in leaning back. Daniel gazed ahead like hadn't noticed any of it.

Johnny slouched a little in his seat. He bent his left leg, dragged it up close against the seat. He uncapped the sunscreen and said:

“Hey, take the wheel a moment, would you?”

He looked over. “What?”

Johnny waggled the sunscreen at him. Daniel almost seemed about to argue, but after a second he cut his eyes back to the road and scooted over. He reached up and took hold of the wheel, the wiry curve of his bicep flexing from the odd angle.

Johnny took his time squeezing the sunscreen out and applying it to his face and neck and the exposed parts of his arms. The pungent zinc smell made him think of summer, which was already over.

“You ever think about how we'll never have another real summer again?” he asked, spreading the sunscreen over his forearms.

Daniel glanced at him, eyes sharp. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, because school's over. You know, we'll have to, like, get jobs and stuff. Adults don't get three months of the year off to take a break or have fun, they just keep working all the time. Forever and ever until they're too old to work, and then they just sit around taking naps

at one in the afternoon. You ever think about that?"

"Well, I hadn't, but now I sure am. Jesus, that's depressing."

"Yeah."

"Guess you could always become a teacher or something? They still get summers off."

"Yeah, me working with kids," said Johnny, recapping the tube with some finality. "That sounds like a great idea."

He took hold of the wheel again, and Daniel's hand slipped out beneath his. After a second, he sat back.

"You've still got some on your nose," said Daniel, eyes out the side of the car.

Stroud to Sapulpa

Just outside the small city of Sapulpa they rumble over a 3-mile stretch of rough asphalt bordered by a concrete retaining wall and guardrail. Johnny felt like he was wincing the whole time. Signs informed them it was part of the original roadbed of the Ozark Trail, built in 1915 and later incorporated into Old 66.

“I guess that's one way to get out of paying for road maintenance,” said Daniel. Johnny gritted his teeth and privately agreed.

In Sapulpa, the highway turned into a main street bordered by buildings done up like they were expecting a shoot-out any day now. They followed a ragged line of wind-tossed signs north a few miles out of the city to a ranch.

Because Daniel wanted to see some goddamn rodeo.

“Think of it this way,” he said to Johnny as they parked on a grassy lawn and looked around at the assortment of pickups and junkers, derby cars almost. “With that shirt, now you fit right in.”

He hopped out of the Avanti and started walking up the gravel drive to where a small crowd was gathered along a fenced paddock. Johnny frowned after him.

“Since when was I the problem? Hey man, you get into another fight, I'm not stepping in this time.”

Daniel flapped a hand at him without turning around. He shook his head and followed.

It wasn't a very formal set-up, just a Saturday afternoon showcase of local talent. Most of the crowd was standing, boots propped up along the first planks of the outer fence. Bored children ran around the parking lot, chasing each other and shouting about the drama of their own little world while their parents sipped beers and made commentary about whoever was next up in the paddock. Johnny didn't really feel like he belonged in either group, but there was beer, so he was okay with it.

When he found Daniel again, the other boy was leaning like a local against the fence and getting a crash course on the finer points of calf roping from a pretty brunette with braces.

“And uh, what about the calf, does it get a prize if it defeats the cowboy?” asked Daniel. The girl giggled. “What? C'mon, it's a fair question.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and drank.

Outside the gate of the paddock, a rangy boy climbed on his horse and sat shifting in his saddle. He rubbed his palms over his denim-clad thighs, adjusted his hat against the glare of the afternoon sun. Put a loop of rope in his mouth and bit down.

A horn sounded and a calf was released into the paddock. The horse raced it down across the dirt, the boy's legs urging it on; the lasso flew like it was an extension of his arm, finding the calf's neck in the air as if by magic or magnetism. The boy swung himself off the horse in nearly the same moment, flinging himself confident and fluid through the air and running the second his boots hit the ground. It was all surprisingly graceful until he got to the calf, and then he had to haul the squirming animal onto its side and tie three of its legs together.

Another horn sounded and the announcer by the barn called out the time: 17.3 seconds.

“Jeez, that was fast,” said Daniel.

“Eh. That's an alright time,” said the girl.

“Seriously? How fast you gotta go to get some respect around here?”

As the girl rattled off good times for state and national stampedes, Johnny watched the boy in the paddock. He was tipping his hat back and grinning at someone over by the fence. He was young, Johnny realized: about their age. He wondered if he did this for fun, or if he was trying to make a go of it in the rodeo circuit; if he thought he could make life bend around the sport and not the other way around.

“Hey, can I have some of that?” asked Daniel, turning and nodding to the beer. Johnny handed it over without thinking and propped his arms up against the fence.

“Think you could do it?” said Daniel.

He shook his head. “Only so many things you can get good at.”

“Yeah, I guess. Probably harder than it looks.”

“And it looks pretty hard.”

“Yeah.”

Johnny looked at the calf down on the ground and tilted his head. “Maybe if they let me use a motorcycle instead of a horse.”

Daniel laughed and passed him the beer back.

Sapulpa to Tulsa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They hung around there a couple hours, until Daniel appeared in danger of being adopted by an Okie Brady Brunch.

“C'mon, we're going,” said Johnny at last, patience zapped by the darkening sky to the west. Last time he'd felt this bored and useless, Ali had dragged him shopping to the mall; the comparison put him on-edge for a couple reasons. One: the obvious; two: at least with her he was getting something in exchange for the torture.

He pulled Daniel away from his good-byes that would probably otherwise have taken another twenty minutes. Switched his grip and pushed him along between the shoulder blades when the other boy finally stopped walking backwards.

“That was nice,” said Daniel. “Man, they sure were friendly.”

“Maybe it was all part of a some kind of plot. Lure travelers off the road and then trap them when a storm hits.” Johnny was staring at the sky again, thinking about the woman's words from earlier.

Daniel stepped out of his steering hand and hopped over the door into the Avanti. “You seriously worried about a little rain? It'll be fine – and hey, the car needs a wash anyway. Still got the Mojave all over her.” He ran a hand down the side and lifted it, showing Johnny his sand-coated fingers like he wasn't painfully aware of the condition of the paint job.

Johnny ignored him and got in. People waved as he carefully reversed over the grass and onto the gravel drive; Daniel turned in the seat and waved back energetically back as he shifted into first and got them the hell out of there.

“Wait, how many beers did you have?” asked Daniel a few miles down the road.

“Not enough,” replied Johnny. And then: “Look for signs for 66, we had to take some weird turns to get to that ranch, remember.”

“You went back at least three times for a refill. Maybe I should drive.”

“Keep wishing. Anyway, look at you, you're practically high after all that. Wouldn't trust you to drive a golf cart right now.”

“It's called being in a good mood,” said Daniel, far too smug as he stretched out in the other seat. He gestured to himself. “Because I'm a people person. I talk to people, I get happy.”

“Bullshit. I'm a person, and you don't get happy when you talk to me.”

“That's because talking to you is like – talking to myself, or the mirror, or whatever. Doesn't count.”

“Fucking weird, is what it is,” muttered Johnny.

“Right, it's so much better to go through life standing back silently and glaring suspiciously at people over the rim of a beer. Hey, there – take a left.” He pointed at the sign Johnny had already spotted.

They took a left. Drove on.

In Tulsa, Johnny kissed Daniel.

Sometimes striking first meant hurting nobody but yourself.

Chapter End Notes

it had to be tulsa, of course it did.
f u se hinton <3

Tulsa

A silver Greyhound bus pulled in behind them at the travel plaza where Route 66 intersected with I-244; its destination sign in the front read *St. Louis/Chicago*.

Johnny put the car in park and watched in his rearview as the bus swung past and pulled up to the diesel pumps on the other side of the plaza. Daniel talked on beside him, oblivious. Something about the history of rodeos he'd learned, Johnny didn't know, he'd kind of tuned him out.

He glanced down at the gas gauge and said, “Put seven bucks in, will you. I'll go pay. Want anything?”

Daniel, already half out of the car, shrugged and shook his head. He'd had a concessions hot dog at the ranch, that was right. Right.

Johnny crossed over to the station, and his eye was drawn again to the bus and the small crowd that had poured out its door. Several people stood around smoking, a couple more broke off to use the restrooms on the backside of the station. Looked like they'd be there a little while.

He put his head down and went inside.

The same mass of touristy crap he'd seen all week greeted him: racks of the same shirts trying to sell him a memory he never had, bumper stickers where the only difference was the outline of the state. Postcards he couldn't send to anyone.

He sidled past a couple flicking through kitschy framed art and crossed into the convenience side of the store. At least nothing there could irritate him. He wasn't insane enough yet to feel moody over plastic-wrapped sticks of beef jerky.

“Seven on three,” he said to the clerk. And as the man was ringing it up, he leaned over to look out the window at the sky. “Hey, you hear anything about the weather?”

“Radio said there's squall line west of here, but it's supposed to miss us,” he replied. He looked at Johnny expectantly; Johnny stared back, confused. “...You going to give me the seven dollars, buddy, or were you expecting it on the house?”

“Oh, right – sorry.” He dug his wallet out and forked over the cash. His face was hot as he turned away.

Daniel was leaning against the Avanti with his arms folded across his chest. He was staring into space, completely ignoring the stopped gas pump, which was still connected to the car.

Johnny was a little too rough as he pushed up next to him, hands fumbling for the handle. Their arms brushed.

“Get off the damn car,” Johnny said to him, two full seconds after he'd already jumped away like he'd been shocked by static. He didn't think he was breathing right.

Daniel's mouth turned down. He looked like he was forcing himself not to back up, shoulders a familiar tense line: like he'd rather die than give ground. “You're in a fucking mood,” he said. “Hangover coming on that quick?”

He screwed the gas cap back into place and slapped the door closed. He glared at Daniel, who put up his hands.

“Jesus, alright. I'm going to take a leak, see if you can calm down before I get back, yeah?”

Johnny twisted to lean back against the Avanti, hands balled into fists as he watched Daniel cross the asphalt. He kicked the cement post next to the gas pump, viciously displeased he couldn't leave some kind of permanent mark. He looked again over at the idling Greyhound. Most of the passengers had got back on: a row of shadowy bent heads and elbows pressed against the windows.

It had to be another 700 miles to Chicago, he thought. He tried picturing the drive – even if they cut back on stops, it was going to be the next day at the earliest. Another twelve hours suffocating next to the other boy.

He had to do something. He had to, because Daniel never would. This was why defensive techniques were the worst: to be any good, there had to be an aggressor. And if Daniel was to be believed, he was apparently willing to wait until some asshole ziplined down and whipped out a knife before *he* started to fight back.

Johnny kicked off the Avanti and stalked after him.

No one else was behind the station, which was distantly relieving. No

witnesses, no group trying to chase him down and kick his faggot ass.

"*Hey*," he called sharply, right before Daniel reached for the men's door.

Daniel started to turn, and he'd mistimed the distance but whatever, fine – he grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back against the filthy bricks. Daniel landed awkwardly arm first, half-curled down in shock.

"What the hell?" he said, eyes wide with flaring temper.

Johnny stared down at him, chest heaving but otherwise frozen. None of this felt right.

Daniel rolled around, straightening up. Right hand coming up to cup his banged elbow. "Seriously, man, what's your problem?"

Around the corner, he thought he could hear the bus cough out a bellyful of exhaust, like the driver was getting ready to pull away. It was now or never.

He put a hand up next to Daniel's head and leaned down to press his closed mouth to his: hard and short, almost like jab. He barely felt it, but he could tell Daniel did by the way he jolted back where there was no space to go.

He pulled away and said, "That Greyhound over there is going to Chicago. If you run, you can catch it."

And then he took the bathroom, because fuck Daniel. He could piss in the median or hold it to the next stop. It wasn't his problem anymore.

In the tiny uninsulated bathroom, this fucking – trucker's outhouse or whatever, Johnny crouched down and put his hands over the back of his head like he was practicing for an earthquake. The dry skin of his palms caught and rubbed on the gauze Daniel had wrapped around him; he kept forgetting he still had it on. His fingers dug painfully in and ripped the stupid thing off. He whipped it hard at the cement wall.

He stared with hot, dry eyes at the metal grate in the center of the floor, eyes tracing the edges of the six slots over and over as he waited. He didn't know how long it would take; he should've counted

off minutes or something.

He crouched there until his thighs started up a minute trembling, and then he stood and washed his hands in the small metal sink without looking at his reflection.

He had to be near the dead center of the country. He could theoretically go any direction he wanted now, wherever the road would take him. If Daniel had left a map in the glove compartment, he'd throw it out, pick a street and just start driving. It was as good a plan as any, which was to say it was stupid as fuck. So that was what he'd do. Okay.

He left the bathroom and crossed the lot. The Greyhound was gone, its place by the pumps now taken by a semi pulling a concrete mixer.

Daniel was sitting in the Avanti, dark messy head bowed.

His feet didn't feel like they were connecting with the ground as he continued walking toward the car. He clenched his hand around the car key so tight, odds said it'd draw blood or leave a permanent imprint.

Johnny stepped up to the driver's side. Daniel looked over at him, jaw at a stubborn angle; eyes angry and determined.

“What, your short legs couldn't catch the bus or something?” he asked after a second. His voice sounded like nothing.

“I declined to make the attempt,” Daniel bit out. He made a big show of looking around. “You getting in or just gonna stand there all night?”

And it looked like rain, but he forgot to put the top up.

Tulsa to Sequoyah

Johnny drove, both hands on the wheel.

“Going kinda fast, don't you think?” called Daniel. His hand was clenched over the side of the Avanti, fingertips bleached.

“You see that?” he said, pointing at ten o'clock, where a heavy shelf of clouds had unfurled from the sky like clothing bursting out of a suitcase.

“Believe me, I see it. You think you can, what, out drive it?” Johnny didn't give a response, but since when had Daniel needed one. “Don't be stupid, the storm's miles across, and god know how fast it's moving. We should find a place to stop.”

Johnny sent him a cold look. “If you don't like how I'm driving, you could've caught the bus.” And that shut up Daniel up.

For approximately five minutes.

“Look,” it came, with the inevitable twisting in the seat, “I obviously don't know what's going on with you, I get that – have been, am currently. Whatever. I mean, I've got some guesses, call them educated, I'm pretty observant when I want to be. But I'm trying to be patient here. And do you really think this is my first time trying to piece together what's wrong with somebody who barely talks, just sits and broods because he's so used to being alone with it? Huh? Well, hate to break it to you, but this is like – Bush League, compared to that. Doesn't even come close. Because however long you've been sitting with your problems – oh, great. Perfect. Right on schedule.”

For rain had started to spatter the windshield.

“How's outrunning a cloud going for you?” asked Daniel as Johnny checked his mirrors and hit his brakes, pulling off to the side of the road. “Pretty sure this storm stretches from Missouri to Texas—”

“Kansas,” said Johnny.

A sedan streaked by them at speed, horn blaring. Johnny turned on his flashers.

Daniel's hands paused over his seatbelt. He blinked at Johnny, mystified. “What?”

“It's Kansas that's on top of Oklahoma, not Missouri. You been staring at a map for like a thousand miles, how do you not know that?”

Johnny got out to wrestle with the top. Daniel made a slow, vague show of helping on his side, but really, how could he focus when so much brain power went into running his mouth?

“I. I knew that,” he said. “Maybe the storm's coming at a diagonal, ever think of that? Anyway, what was I—”

“You were about to tell me that my problems were no big deal compared to others.”

“That is not what I was gonna say. Not even close. Don't put words in my mouth, man, you're bad at it. What I'm saying is, your whole stoic, silent routine, this – lock down and deal with it on your own crap? I'm pretty sure Mr. Miyagi did it for years before he met me. Years, okay.” They got the top fastened and Daniel spread his arms, like, look at me, I'm pretty fucking great. “But I got him to talk to me.”

Johnny got back in the car and rolled his window up, Daniel half a beat behind.

“I mean, a little. Mostly he listened, I guess. But he definitely did some talking.”

“Probably just desperate to get you to stop,” said Johnny.

Their words sounded different in the enclosed car. They were used to pitching their voices over the sound of the road and wind. Now the world outside was muffled, and the world inside felt impossibly small. Johnny could hear the creak of the leather when Daniel shifted to buckle up.

He looked at the dark line of clouds through the streaking glass. Switched on his wipers and, after a second, his headlights.

Pulled back on the road.

“Yeah, well. A good fighter uses all tools at his disposal,” said Daniel.

He was doing a pretty good job of sounding like his usual self, but Johnny had been trapped in the car and a hotel room for five days with this kid. He heard the bravado for what it was: the forced cheer, the frantic grasping. He just didn't understand *why*. Why was Daniel bothering.

“Why didn't you take the bus?” he asked.

“Why'd you kiss me?”

His hands flexed on the steering wheel. When he thought he could speak in some degree of normal, he said, “Wanted to piss you off.”

“You piss me off like, ten times a day. What was different this time?”

But Johnny couldn't answer. No matter how he tried, and he tried – when he opened his mouth to speak, no words came.

Driving in the rain was always such a pain. Conditions could change in a second, with no warning. One moment your wipers were keeping up with it, and you could still see the boundary lines of the road – and then it was like someone upstairs turned a dial and all that went away, the storm smeared the road into oblivion, taking the world with it.

“Johnny, slow down,” said Daniel sharply.

“Shut up. Don't talk.”

He was hunched over his wheel, trying desperately to see. He wasn't even going that fast, Daniel just couldn't feel the road, couldn't see either. They might as well have been rocketing through the space, hundreds of miles an hour but with no gravity to help them sense it.

“Seriously, you need to—”

“I need to focus,” he snapped, “So if you'd just once, for *once* in your *fucking life*, just shut up.”

They maybe hydroplaned a little then, and Daniel's hands shot to the door in a death grip. But he shut up.

The cloud shelf arrived and with it, the wind. Johnny deliberately relaxed his grip on the steering wheel, tried to do the same with his legs. Tensing up in bad conditions was the worst thing he could do.

Daniel pointed. “There, overpass. Better than nothing.”

He didn't argue. Like it wanted to get one more blow in before it was too late, the rain pounded down harder than ever, and distantly Johnny winced at the thought of what it was doing to his top.

The abrupt cessation of the pounding sound when they pulled off the

road under the tiny overpass was almost disorienting. After a moment of staring forward out the windshield at the small waterfall coming off the concrete overhead, Johnny turned off his wipers. Then he shut the car off.

They got out.

The wind was still whipping around, made them squint. The temperature must've dropped at least ten degrees. The sound of the rain echoed faintly against the stretch of bare cement.

“If this turns into a tornado and we die, I'm going to be so mad,” said Daniel.

Johnny ignored him and rounded the car, inspecting it for damage.

“Well, at least now we have plenty of time to talk. No distractions. Where were we? Right, you shoved me around back there, completely unprovoked – not cool, by the way – and then you kissed me. What was that. I mean, you say you were trying to piss me off, but I don't think that's the usual go-to tactic one employs. When one's not. I mean – you know.”

The Avanti seemed fine, the top wet, of course, but unscathed. But then Johnny got to the passenger side and his steps stuttered.

“Fuck,” he said. He twisted around and stared back in the direction they came from. Overhead, thunder finally arrived.

“What?” asked Daniel, suddenly much closer.

“I lost a hubcap.” His rear passenger wheel stared back at him, bolts naked and accusing.

“You've gotta be kidding me.”

“I wouldn't joke about that.”

“Not – not the way I meant that, Johnny. Jesus Christ. Hey," and his hand shot out to grab his arm as Johnny started forward. “Where do you think you're going?”

He shook him off roughly, glared back. “I'm going to go look for it, what do you think? It might've just popped off when we slowed down coming in here.”

Daniel stared at him in disbelief. “Would you forget about the fucking

car for a moment? There's a thunderstorm right over our heads and I'm trying to fucking talk to you. What is wrong with you?”

In response, Johnny turned and marched out into the rain.

Under a Small Rural Overpass

It took about five seconds for his hair and shirt to get plastered to his body, and six for him to feel like a complete idiot. He toughed it out for another minute anyway, wiping the rain out of his eyes and squinting down into the filling ditch. But it was hopeless. He knew that.

Blinding, deafening: the flash-bang of lightning overhead made him flinch and duck. Daniel shouted behind him, and he gave up.

Johnny ran back under the overpass, eyes returning automatically to the Avanti's exposed rear wheel. His shirt and jeans hung heavy on his frame, already chilling. With every step he took, his socks sloshed in his sneakers, splatting wet on the asphalt.

Daniel turned in place and watched him closely as he trudged over to the cement wall and sank against it. Johnny met his eyes for a fraction of a second and then looked away. He let his head thump back against the wall – then flinched sharply forward and down, because he forgot about the bump on the back of his head.

“Hey, moron,” said Daniel, crouching in front of him, hands automatically reaching up check the cut. “How about you watch that?”

Johnny bent his head forward over his knees and let him probe the sore spot. He shut his eyes, because it felt good to be touched, and so very pathetic to admit it.

After satisfying himself that the cut hadn't reopened and started bleeding everywhere again, Daniel dropped his hands to Johnny's shoulders.

“...Why's your stepdad selling the car?” he asked his bowed head.

He didn't ask how he knew. Didn't even particularly think to question it. The fact felt so enormous, so fundamental to the world that it was self-evident, maybe belonged in the country's founding documents. Taxes were bad, the British were pussies, and Johnny was losing the Avanti. Some things were just obvious.

Johnny cracked open his eyes and looked at the car through his dripping fringe. He thought about that afternoon at home, looking out

the window at it sitting in the driveway, the clutching impossibility of its absence tearing at his chest until he couldn't think of anything else – because it was easier to think of it than everything else.

He made himself speak. “He said, if I left – if I moved out, didn't make a fuss, he wouldn't tell my mom about the magazines the housekeeper found in my room.”

“Magazines?” said Daniel quietly.

He considered the warm weight of the other boy's hands on his shoulders. “Yeah, they. With – guys.” It was such a stupid thing to get caught on, after so long. Even now, a thousand plus miles away, he still didn't quite believe it had happened. Surely not. He pushed on, “But then he said he was gonna sell the Avanti. And, I don't know. I just started driving, I. I didn't mean anything by it. I don't know what I was doing.”

Daniel's hands slipped off him, but not like he was moving away; he dropped out of his crouch, settling on the ground beside Johnny with his legs crossed.

“You haven't called your mom in a couple days,” he said, realizing.

He nodded slightly. “Figured he's probably told her by now. When I didn't show up like I said I would, for my stuff.”

Daniel's palm smacked the ground as he ducked forward to meet his eyes. He looked baffled, maybe even a little angry. “Why the hell did you agree to drive me past Flagstaff?”

He didn't get it, of course he didn't. Why would he. That day in Flagstaff had been the first glimmer of direction Johnny'd had in ages. You don't turn your back on that, not after so long feeling aimless.

But Daniel persisted. “No, man. You could've made it back in time. Why didn't you dump my ass and floor it?”

“Because fuck him,” said Johnny, meeting his eyes. He grabbed what breath he could and made himself continue, even if it felt like he was dragging razor wire the wrong way along his insides. “Fuck that whole place. The idea of going back there, handing over the keys – all for what? He'd always have this thing to hold over my head. For the rest of my life. It's not like it's going away – you think I haven't tried? Believe me, I've fucking tried. And if my mom's gonna find out, I'd rather get it over with, find out she hates me, that I make her *sick*—”

And he didn't really understand what happened next, only that Daniel's chest was against his and his arms around his neck and he was hugging Johnny.

It wasn't like the backslapping hugs he and his friends gave each other during games or tournaments or when they'd had too much to drink down by the beach. It was too tight, too close. Daniel didn't let up, and after a moment, a ragged breath shuddered out of Johnny's chest.

He hid his eyes in the other boy's shoulder and held him back.

His Arms to Incredible Awkwardness

Johnny didn't know how long they sat there. He was practically a third of the way to lying down, spine uncomfortably bent against the wall as he slumped next to Daniel, head on his shoulder and staring at the Avanti. He didn't want to move.

Daniel had his knees up to his chest and an arm still around him, and seemed content to sit there as long as it took for Johnny to work himself out of it. What a weird kid.

Eventually the slices of brightening sky on either side of the overpass could not be ignored. The storm had mostly passed, leaving a light rain. There was no reason not to get back on the road, and every reason to separate, because other cars would be coming along any minute.

So Johnny shifted up, grimacing. He seriously needed to start stretching every day; the road lifestyle was getting to be a bit much.

Daniel's arm fell away and they both stood, shaking out their limbs.

Johnny glanced down at himself and then over at Daniel, abruptly aware of his cold, wet clothes. “Sorry. If I – got you wet.”

Daniel plucked at the damp patch on the front of his shirt and shrugged. “You should probably change though, it's—”

Johnny held up a hand. “If you say something about catching a cold, I won't let you live it down from here to Chicago, swear to god.”

For some reason, this made Daniel kinda smile, though he looked away to try to hide it. “Maybe I was going to say, think about your leather seats?”

He squinted at him and yanked open the pearl fastenings of his shirt. “When am I not thinking about them?”

“Point.”

Johnny stripped off the wet shirt and went over to open the trunk. He tried wringing the shirt out a little before tossing it in. He grabbed his plaid but before he could put it on, a towel landed on his head.

He pulled it off and looked at it. He leaned around the trunk and

looked at Daniel. “Did you steal this from the hotel?”

“Don't look at me like that. Hotel doesn't have air conditioning, they can't go crying if someone steals a towel.”

Johnny shrugged and ducked under it, toweling his hair dry. He patted down his chest and pulled the plaid on, shut the trunk. He kicked off his shoes; unbuttoned his jeans and dragged them down. His socks were a lost cause too. He was bending to pull them off when a burst of car horn startled him upright.

A pickup with three young women in the cab drove slowly by, the driver laying on the horn.

“Hey, boys,” called the redhead from the passenger side, dragging the words out. She tipped her sunglasses down and gave him an appreciative look over the rims. He had to stop himself from holding the bundled jeans in front of his dick, or dragging the loose sides of his shirt to cover his nipples. He grinned and nodded at them instead, acknowledging the point. Man got caught out in public in just his boxers, he had to take his licks. That was like, feminism or something.

With a final burst of giggles, the horn cut off and the truck continued on its way. Johnny cleared his throat and opened his door to throw the wet jeans, socks, and shoes onto the floor of the backseat. He started buttoning up his shirt.

“You gonna drive like that?” asked Daniel.

He hadn't thought what this might look like, after his whole thing earlier. But he only had the one pair of jeans. He said, “I'm not, I don't mean anything by it—”

“No, I know,” said Daniel quickly, a little pink-faced. “I didn't mean like that. I don't think – I just meant. Uh, barefoot?”

Johnny blinked and looked down to his feet. “Why can't I drive barefoot?” he asked, confused.

“No reason. I always thought it felt weird, the few times I've done it.”

“That's because you're short, and need all the help you can get reaching the pedals.”

Daniel nodded slowly, eyes rolling and expression collapsing out into exasperation. “Yeah, yeah.”

They got back into the car.

“Can't believe I'm leaving the hubcap,” Johnny muttered after a second, and turned the key. He was sure he could hear Daniel's sigh over the sound of the ignition.

Okay to Narcissa

They didn't really speak for a while, but it was okay.

Light rain on the windshield; the late sun breaking through an opening in the west and turning the expanse of dull autumn fields a brilliant gold under a sky that was mostly still overcast and dark – that was okay.

A song on the radio that started on a highway and ended in the stars, and was all about coming back again (and again and again and again and again and again). Even though they hadn't been talking anyway, it felt different when it came on. One of those strange moments that passed in cars sometimes when you were with another person: a fraught unspoken knowledge that you both were listening and sharing something. Or maybe Johnny was imagining it, but either way – it was okay.

Maybe Daniel was silent because he was rethinking everything from the past couple hours, full of regret. But Johnny didn't think so. He looked too relaxed, face too soft. This was Daniel, after all; he could probably stand against an entire army and be okay.

As for himself – Johnny put his elbow up against the window, distantly regretful of the necessity of the top, and he thought, maybe: he was okay too.

Narcissa to Galena

“Hello Kansas,” said Daniel. He yawned and tried stretching, only for his arms to hit the roof. He sent a disgruntled glance at it and shrunk back into the seat. Johnny glanced at him; Daniel fidgeted and shrugged. “Car feels a lot smaller with the top up.”

“We can put it down in a bit.” He monitored the situation in the passenger seat for a few more minutes before asking, “You need to piss or something?”

“No – well. Yeah, actually, I kinda do.”

He shook his head and hit his indicator. He'd barely pulled onto the shoulder when Daniel hopped out, hands already working his fly.

Johnny put the car in park and rested his head against the window, closing his eyes for a moment. It had been a long day. The smell of rain drifted in through the door Daniel had left open. He breathed it in and felt himself relax further. If he could just – stay right here, maybe.

The sound of gravel crunching underfoot made him open his eyes and look over; Daniel stood in the door, head ducked to peer in at him: expression flickering with something he didn't recognize.

“You want me to drive?” he asked. His eyes darted over Johnny, and then he turned his head to look at the road, mouth indenting at the corner.

“Are you trying to take advantage of me?” said Johnny. That recaptured his attention. Daniel's eyes went wide, and it was pretty funny.

“No, I, I just thought – you seemed kinda tired, is all and—” He narrowed his eyes as Johnny fought to keep a straight face. “*Really*?”

He lifted a shoulder and dropped his hand to the gear stick. Smirked a little at the road. “Guy opens up a little to you and five minutes later you think you can drive his car? You move quick, man. But I guess I already knew that, way you moved in on Ali last year.”

Daniel shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

He slid back into the car and shut the door, and yeah, the Avanti did feel a lot smaller with the top up.

They drove a while more and Johnny asked, “Hey, you still got that newspaper you picked up in El Reno?”

“Somewhere in here, yeah. Why?”

“Could you shove it in my shoes, try to dry them out a little.”

Daniel got as far as kneeling up on the seat before pausing and looking at him, sharply knowing. “How's driving barefoot treating you?”

Johnny's toes were freezing, but he wasn't going to mention it. He wasn't a whiner. “Hey, I never said it was ideal.”

Daniel nearly tipped headfirst into the footwell of the backseat, reaching for the shoes, and Johnny had to ignore his backside wiggling next to his head, but in the end the shoes got their newspapers.

They passed the sign welcoming them to Missouri, the Show-Me State, whatever the hell that meant.

Daniel lifted a hand. “So long, Kansas.”

Galena to Albatross

“Are you looking forward to being back home?” asked Johnny.

Daniel turned into the corner of the door and made a face. “Parsippany is *not* home. Parsippany is where fun goes to die, or at the very least get a serious respiratory condition. Now, if I was going back to stay in Newark – I don't know, maybe. I guess, yeah, it'd be good to see some old friends. But like, tell you the truth, it wasn't that great there.”

Johnny's bare foot slipped off the gas pedal and the car's speed immediately dipped. Daniel looked over.

“What—”

“Did I just hear Daniel LaRusso admit that New Jersey isn't that great?” says Johnny.

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, give me a break.”

“New Jersey,” he said, leaning forward: bring a hand up to punctuate each incredible word, “isn't that great.”

“That's not what I meant. New Jersey's got its problems, sure. But I'll tell you what, it's a hell of a lot better than the Valley.”

Johnny pounded his palm on the car horn and held it to bury the other boy's words. He rolled his window down so he could stick his head and chest out and shout the vital news at a passing field full of brown cows that *Daniel LaRusso said New Jersey isn't that great*.

Daniel got a hand on his arm and dragged him back inside the car. “Glad you're having fun with that, really, that's great. Just great. Maybe watch the road a little more, genius?”

Johnny broke his hold by shoving him. Daniel automatically shoved back, and then they nearly did drive off the road, but Johnny was grinning the whole time.

“So what are you going to do there? Aside from die of boredom, I mean.”

Daniel flipped his hand. “I don't know. I guess if I'm going to be there a couple months, I should get a job, make some dough. Tired of being broke all the time.”

“Think you're going to stay there? Afterwards, I mean.”

“In Parsippany?”

“In New Jersey. Wherever.”

He shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. “I don't know. Fresno doesn't really sound appealing. But if Mr. Miyagi doesn't come back—”

“He's going to come back,” said Johnny.

Daniel gave him an annoyed look, because god forbid anybody try to make him feel better. “You sound pretty confident for someone who doesn't, y'know, *know the guy*.”

Some people are worth coming back for, was the thing. Just because Johnny didn't have that didn't mean he didn't know it. If he was this Miyagi guy and he knew someone like Daniel was back in California – well.

“He was there for you last December, right?” said Johnny, glancing over to catch the other boy's hesitant nod. “And he gave you that car, the car you decided to be all dumb and sore about and leave behind, in case, what, in case he'd changed his mind?”

“Okay,” said Daniel, shifting up in his seat, “okay, you know what?”

“I'm just saying,” said Johnny loudly. “One of us is being stupid here, and it's not me, man.”

Albatross to Springfield

It was getting on to the golden hour, and Johnny brought up stopping for the night.

“Y'know, if we switched off driving, you wouldn't have to worry about being tired,” said Daniel.

“Can it.”

Daniel flicked his hand at him, what was that, and then reached into the glove compartment for his map. Johnny glanced at him. He looked back at the road. He looked at Daniel.

Daniel finally noticed the judgment. He lowered the map and said, “I was just thinking, if we're going to sleep in the damn car again, maybe we could do it somewhere other than an abandoned gas station or ghost town?”

“Why do you say it like that, like I've been showing you a bad time?” Johnny wanted to know. “I don't control what's on the road. Aren't a lot of choices in the desert.”

“Exactly. But we're not in the desert anymore. Look around. There are – trees and stuff. And,” he said, sitting up and brandishing the map, “there's a lake just north of Springfield. Let's park there for the night.”

Johnny considered this, or pretended to, anyway. Whatever Daniel wanted was what they were going to do, but Johnny was taking that particular secret to the fucking grave.

“We could have a fire,” said Daniel.

Johnny wiped his nose and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

“We could buy hotdogs, spear 'em with sticks.”

“You had a hotdog earlier,” he reminded him

“*Whatever*. What else do people eat over fires?”

Johnny thought of all the cowboy movies he'd seen. “I don't know. Beans?”

Daniel snapped his fingers. “S'mores.”

Johnny sighed and looked at a passing road sign for Springfield. “Guess we better find a supermarket.”

They don't try to go too deep in the city, figuring they'd get lost real quick if they lost sight of the highway. After twenty minutes of criss-crossing the vicinity, they found a small neighborhood IGA.

“Whoa, whoa,” said Daniel, putting a hand back in the car as Johnny moved to climb out. His eyes were a little wide.

Johnny paused. “What?”

“You can't come inside, man.” He gestured at him comprehensively. “You're not wearing any pants.” Johnny glanced down. “Like, they don't even make signs about that, it's so obvious. Shirt, shoes, sure – they feel like they gotta remind people. But no one thinks it's okay to stroll into a place without pants."

Johnny bit back a curse. He twisted around in the seat to reach for his jeans, but they were still solidly wet. He considered pulling them on anyway.

“Look, just stay here. I'll get the stuff.” Daniel started duck back out of the car.

“But you won't buy beer.”

His head reappeared, apparently for the sole purpose of giving Johnny a sarcastic smile. “You're right. I won't.”

He watched him walk in front of the car and cross the lot to the small store. He rolled down the window and shouted out: “Who goes camping without beer?”

Daniel did not turn around, but a woman passing the Avanti looked down at him and made a scandalized face. He quickly fell back in his seat and cranked the window up.

Some people really had a way of making a guy feel naked.

Springfield to Fellows Lake

“Okay, uh – take a left here.”

“Now you're just guessing,” said Johnny, but he took the left.

“Lady at the store said to look for the old red shack – that's an old red shack, right?” And he pointed like Johnny couldn't see it, like he was genuinely asking for confirmation.

The paved road ended abruptly a quarter-mile up the the new direction. The Avanti nudged down with a loud crunch of gravel; Johnny turned his head to look at Daniel, who said:

“She'll be fine, just go slow!”

So they crept along at an agonizing ten miles per hour, until the long, grassy meadowland on either side of the dirt road gave way to patches of trees and finally woods. The temperature dropped a couple degrees from the shade and it grew darker in the car. Some of the trees had started to turn color, patches of yellow overhead helping lighten the imposing feeling of being surrounded.

“I don't see any lake,” said Johnny eventually.

“It's ahead, I'm telling you.”

“If we hit a dead end and I have to reverse out of these woods in the dark, I'm going to put you in a headlock.”

“Yeah, yeah.” It was only a little depressing how unthreatened Daniel sounded. Habit.

They rolled up a hill on a curving path that was cut and eroded down the center with years of springmelt run-off. Johnny gritted his teeth as they bounced over dips and rocks but then they were at the top and the lake was stretched out below them on the other side. There was a small clearing by the shore, a primitive campsite that didn't even have a picnic table, just the remains of an old fire ring made out of stones and a couple logs lying around for seating.

They drove up as close as Johnny dared. He cut the engine and they climbed out and listened for a moment to the sounds of the lake: the wind over the water, the evening call of birds, the post-rain song of frogs.

The sun was just beginning to sink behind the trees along the far side, but for the moment it reflected off the water and made everything golden.

“Think I missed water,” said Daniel.

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

Johnny spread his shoes and jeans out on the hood of the Avanti, trying to get some sun on them for as long as he could before nightfall. Then he hopped up next to them and spread himself out, because he figured the same logic applied.

“You know we have to collect firewood,” said Daniel, turning around from the lake and putting his hands on his hips as he surveyed him. “Like, preferably before it gets dark and we can't see anything. It doesn't just magically appear, ready for us to make a fire with it.”

Johnny put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. “I don't have any shoes on, what do you want me to do.”

“Don't be a baby. What, you afraid some pine cones or something?” Johnny sighed and levered himself up on his elbows to look across at the other boy. Daniel seemed to brace himself against some overwhelming onslaught. “And don't start on about how you drove all day, that was by your choice. It's like how my ma would get home from work and then insist on cooking supper and *then* later try to use it against me in an argument. I offered, man.”

Johnny flexed his feet idly in the air. He shrugged and started to slide off the hood.

“Alright,” said Daniel loudly. “Fine. I'll get the firewood, you just lie there, sunning yourself like some kind of. Goddamn lizard.”

“I'll build the fire,” offered Johnny, settling back to hide his smirk.

“What, you think I don't know how to build a fire?” said Daniel, stalking past him into the woods.

Fellows Lake, 7:47 PM

It started with:

“Of course I know how to start a fire,” said Daniel.

And was followed by:

“Well, how hard can it be, anyway,” said Johnny, snatching the matches from him.

Leading to:

“I think we need to begin with like, smaller pieces? What do they call it, kindling. You still got that newspaper?”

“The newspaper you had me shove in your soaked shoes, you mean?”

"Then hand me one of your maps."

"What do you mean, *one* of my maps?"

"Give it up, man."

And then came the helpful observation:

“The wood's a little damp. All the wood was damp. I mean, it did *rain* this afternoon. Don't give me that look, Johnny.”

“*We could have a fire*, he says. *Let's have s'mores*. Super smart. What a great idea this was.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

But eventually they got a flame going. It was small and hissed a lot, and they had to keep shifting around the circle to avoid sitting in a cloud of smoke, but it was, technically, a goddamn fire.

Johnny pulled on his jeans, and they were a little damp still but it was still better than nothing. His shoes were definitely a lost cause for the night, though, so he made do by doubling up with two pairs of socks from the pack he bought back in Tucumcari.

He was about to close the trunk again when he glanced over at the fire. Daniel was sitting on one of the log seats, a little hunched over his legs. Familiar posture. Johnny rolled his eyes and grabbed the blanket and shut the trunk.

"*What*—" said Daniel, when Johnny threw the blanket at his head.

He sat on a log across from him. "You know, for someone who keeps going on about how much you hate California, you went native pretty fast. Did you only bring shorts with you?"

Daniel pulled the blanket off his head and blinked at it. He was slow in responding. "You know what the temperature was when I left? Wasn't really thinking." He looked at Johnny and added, "*I* didn't have an air-conditioned car."

"You're going to freeze in New Jersey."

Daniel shrugged, indifferent. He swung the blanket over his shoulders. "Eh, I'll find a thrift shop or something. Not a hard fix."

They settled in silence for a while, while each fiddled with his chosen fire stick, picking at the bark on the tip and waving it over the fire to, as Daniel insisted, sanitize the cooking surface.

"I don't think this fire is going to cook these hotdogs," said Johnny, fishing into the brown grocery sack.

"They're already cooked," said Daniel, the know-it-all. "You can eat them cold if you have to."

"Well, good. Because I'm saying we're going to have to."

Daniel leaned forward to throw another handful of pathetic twigs on the fire. In the faint, flickering light, his expression looked more fond than it could possibly be; firelight smoothing out the finer lines of thought and emotion, the shadows always trying to make everything more appealing.

"Try to be a little patient," said Daniel, and Johnny couldn't remember what he was talking about.

Fellows Lake, 8:40 PM

“You're supposed to roast those.”

Johnny threw another one in the air and caught it in his mouth. He thought it was pretty impressive, considering he could barely see the thing. “Roast them with what,” he asked around a mouthful of chalky marshmallow.

“Cold marshmallows are gross.”

“Cold hotdogs are grosser.”

“We should've bought more food, huh.”

“*We*?”

“What the hell is that?” Johnny squinted out at the lake, but of course he couldn't see anything, let alone the bird making all the racket.

“I don't know,” said Daniel, poking the fire. “But it sounds like it's dying, whatever it is.”

“Maybe it's like, a mating call.”

“In the fall?”

“Why not? No reason a bird can't get it on in the fall.”

“There'd be no point. You can't have birds hatching in the middle of winter, they'd fall out of the nest into a pile of snow and like, die.”

“Now you sound like Mr. Brennan from health class, like the only possible reason to have sex is to make little baby birds.”

“They're *birds*, Johnny. They don't even have sex, not really, they—”

Johnny nibbled on a marshmallow and waited.

“How do birds have sex, anyway?” wondered Daniel.

“No idea.”

“Man, it's really dark out here.”

“Yeah. This fire sucks.”

“You know, it makes sense that I don't know how to build a better fire – I'm from Newark. That's a proper city. But what about you? You said California's like four states in one. None of them teach a guy how to make a fire?”

“Four states of desert and ocean and cool cities.”

“You telling me you never started a fire on a beach?”

“Driftwood goes up if you so much as threaten it with a Bic. It's not the same thing.”

They stared at the small, dark red flame for a while.

“It's really dark,” Daniel said again. He had the blanket up around his head, and looked ridiculous. Like a slug or something.

Johnny sighed.

“Kinda creepy,” said Daniel, looking around, “being out in the middle of nowhere like this, not being able to see anything. Like, we could be surrounded and not even know it.”

“Yeah. If some guy with a hook for a hand shows up, I'm tossing you at him and running.”

Daniel's mouth twisted skeptically. “If some guy with a hook for a hand shows up, he's gonna go for the Avanti first.”

He paused. “Really?”

“That's how the stories always go. They get out and find the hook like, embedded in the roof of the car – did you just—”

“No,” said Johnny quickly, hiding his hands between his knees: a reflexive shudder still threatening to overtake him.

“Anyway, yeah, he'll go for the car. You gonna let him get away with

that?”

“Good point. Hook guy tries to go for the Avanti, we're taking him out.”

“Oh, it's we again. Moment ago I was hook bait.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Big of you.”

“Think we could take him out? Together, I mean.”

“Of course. Some hook-handed psycho doesn't stand a chance. I mean, look at us, we did one kata together. We're unstoppable.”

Johnny dragged his fire stick along the dirt at his feet. He squinted across the fire at the other boy. “We should do it again tomorrow morning. First thing, before we drive out.”

Daniel pulled the blanket more tightly around his head. He said quietly, “Sure. Sounds good.”

Fellows Lake, 9:43 PM

Some things were easier to talk about in the dark.

“Bobby was the only one who knew. I don't know how the other guys would've reacted, but – I can guess.” He stared at the embers. “Freshman year, there was this kid. He was so stupid, or maybe just unlucky, I don't know. He couldn't hide it. It was all there for everyone to see – and hear. His voice, it was. God. Can't imagine walking around every day all day sounding like that. So obvious, I mean. At least I look and sound like a normal guy. I don't know why he didn't just pretend to be mute or something.”

Daniel's voice drifted over, perfectly neutral. “Maybe he didn't think it was something he should have to hide.”

“Yeah, that's a real nice sentiment, Daniel. Try holding onto it when you're getting your ass kicked every day like he was.”

“You may recall I have some experience with that,” he said, tone somewhere between dry and edged.

Johnny shifted on his log seat, uncomfortable. “That's different.”

“How? How is it different? Because I can tell you from the perspective of the guy getting beat, it all probably feels the same.”

“We weren't messing with you because of – what you were, or, or *who* you were. Except I guess we kinda were, because, I mean, you're *you*.” He could tell he was doing a crap job of excusing himself here. He didn't even understand how the conversation had taken this turn.

“What's that even mean? Why did you do it, then? All of it. And don't tell me it was because of Ali, you seemed to get over her after like, a month, and you guys were still looking to bully me after that.”

Johnny pressed his lips tight and rubbed the back of his neck, staring down. “You're going to think it's stupid.”

“Tell me,” he said instantly, because offering up something that would make Johnny look stupid to Daniel was like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

“I didn't think of it as bullying,” he said.

“You're right, that is stupid. It was five to one, Johnny, what did you think—”

“It felt like, I don't know. War? The way you always reacted, it just seemed funny more than anything.”

“Yeah, Halloween was real funny. I can see how you'd find that hilarious.”

He winced into the darkness. “I'm – sorry. I'm real sorry about that. All of it. I wasn't thinking clearly last fall, it was all just. I don't know. A lot. Swear I woke up December 20th and it was like I'd dreamed the whole thing.”

“Yeah, well,” said Daniel, a little grudging. He didn't add that it was okay, but the guy was still sitting there, so. Maybe it was, a little.

They didn't speak for a couple minutes, and then Daniel asked about the kid from his freshman year, what happened to him.

“Oh, his parents pulled him out,” said Johnny. “Sent him to military school.”

It was a little crazy, the choices parents got to make for a kid. Johnny had enough trouble deciding things for himself; the idea of deciding for someone else, a whole other person, was almost too much. What gave anyone the right?

“Hey, Johnny?”

“Yeah.”

“When you drop me in Chicago, you should really call your mom.” He didn't say anything, and Daniel pressed on, determined. “You gotta know, man. You can't keep just – driving around the country. You need to know where things stand.”

His hand went tight on his fire stick, and he was so thankful for their crappy little fire, how his face was hidden just then. “And if. If she tells me to stay away? If Sid takes the car and I'm just left standing on some hill in Encino with a backpack of clothing? What do I do then?”

“You said Bobby knew.”

“I can't stay with Bobby, he's living in dorms at Pitzer.”

“Well, you'll figure it out. Hey, if Mr. Miyagi comes back, you could

always come stay with me and him until you get, like. A job and a place."

The offer was so absurd, he actually laughed a little. "You think your sensei would let me stay with him, after how I fought in the All Valley."

"He might make you paint the fence a couple thousand times, but yeah. I think he would. But you might not even need to – you need to call your mom, man."

A week ago, Johnny was doing ninety on an interstate, trying to see if the speed might pound his thoughts into some kind of order. It hadn't worked. Now here was Daniel, making everything sound so clean and easy.

"Yeah," he said. He tossed his stick into the fire. "I know."

Fellows Lake, 10:55 PM

Eventually the time came when Johnny tossed a log onto the fire and instead of catching, it put the tiny flame clean out.

“Well,” said Daniel.

“Yeah.”

“Probably pretty late anyway.”

“Yeah.”

They got up and shuffled around, getting ready to sleep. Johnny pulled on his Gallup sweater and fought a slight shiver as he brushed his teeth. The ground felt like it was leaching all his body heat out through his feet. He jumped a little in place safely out in the dark, the car and Daniel at his back.

“You want this,” called Daniel. Johnny looked around, squinting, and saw him heft the blanket meaningfully.

He turned his head and spat. “Nah, I'm good. You're the one always complaining about the cold.”

He couldn't really see him, but something about the way his vague body shape moved made Johnny think he was rolling his eyes. Regardless, Daniel ducked into the backseat of the car without another word.

It was marginally warmer in the Avanti, if only because there was no breeze. Johnny curled up over the front seat, arms to chest and knees to arms. If he waited it out, surely the combined power of their body heat and breathing would warm the space up.

“Man, maybe I did go native,” said Daniel from the backseat. “One measly year in the land of palm trees and I can't handle a fall night? What the hell. It's probably like – 55 out there, that's nothing.”

“It's because you're so scrawny,” said Johnny. “You need bulk to stay warm.”

“Yeah, your bulk seems to be doing wonders for you. I can practically hear your bones rattling.”

Johnny tried to force himself to go still, but it just made his whole body tense up. “I'm fine.”

“You're stupid.”

“I don't know why you're attacking me. I gave you a fucking blanket, and you're calling me stupid. That's nice, that's real nice, Daniel.”

The leather creaked as Daniel sat up and peered over the top of the seat at him. He eyed the way Johnny was curled up and said, “Hey, I offered it to you.”

He gritted his teeth. “And I said I was fine.”

“Yeah, you look it.” He was silent a moment, but didn't sit back. Eventually he said, tone a little weird, “I'd say we could share, but I don't know how we'd fit on the seat. We'd have to sleep like, sitting up, and I don't think you'd get any better sleep that way.”

Johnny shifted onto his back, legs bent, and blinked up at him. His hands clenched together. He felt his pulse start to quicken. The words formed and fell apart three times before he made himself push them out in a rush:

“The back seat folds down.”

Fellows Lake, 11:19 PM

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What do you mean, the back seat folds down,” said Daniel, sounding almost outraged. Johnny shut his eyes for a moment – in relief or irritation, he couldn't decide which. “You mean we been scrunching our bodies up, torturing our spines, and this whole time we coulda been stretched out?”

It was best to ignore him, he decided as he sat up. He rolled over the top of the seat, shared a hot breath next to Daniel in the tiny space and thought for two seconds that this had been a terrible, terrible mistake. But it was too late; the Avanti's secret was out.

He pushed Daniel, meaning only to make him move so he could lift the bottom of the seat into the footwell, but the other boy mistook the move and shoved him back. They engaged in a very brief, and very stupid struggle, and then Johnny said loudly:

“Oh my god, can we just go to bed? Get out of the way, man.”

“Oh,” said Daniel, expression relaxing. “Uh, sure.” He climbed into the front seat and watched with bright-eyed curiosity as Johnny hauled first one half of the bottom of the seat up, then the other. He pulled down the back of the seat, opening the space into the trunk.

He knelt there awkwardly, head tilted against the low roof of the car, and scratched his nose. “It's uh, it's not a whole lot longer than sleeping on the seats—”

“Better than nothing,” said Daniel, already making a triumphant return to the back. He flopped down next to him in a tangle of limbs and blanket, and made a noise as his feet hit something at the far end. He raised his head. “What the—”

“Emergency kit. Here, I'll move it to the front.” Anything to avoid looking at him, really. This was such a bad idea. Such a bad, bad idea.

He hauled the emergency kit up from the foot of the trunk and hoisted it into the front seat. Then he rubbed the tops of his thighs and squinted out the window into the darkness.

How many hours was it to sunrise, anyway? Maybe he could tough it out. Maybe he could go jogging through the woods, or for a swim or something. Nighttime swims could be cool – well, it'd be freezing, probably, but there were worse things than being cold. Being cold was a state of mind more than anything, it's not like he'd actually freeze to death, and anyway, with all the driving it wasn't like he'd been getting any proper exercise. If he wasn't careful, he'd fall completely out of shape, and then what would he be, just a homeless guy who couldn't run a six-minute mile? What kind of life was that.

“Johnny?”

He glanced down and then wished he hadn't. Daniel was on his back, hair falling away from his forehead, which was wrinkled faintly in confusion.

“Hm?”

“You're kneeling on the blanket. You gonna lie down or what?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah.” He moved to lower himself on his side, legs stretching out at 70 percent capacity before his feet hit the end of the trunk. It was better than the front seat, sure, but at what cost. Why had he done this to himself? Because he was cold? Well, he wasn't cold anymore. Problem solved.

Daniel cleared his throat and flipped the blanket over him. “Don't overthink it, man.”

“I'm not. What?”

Daniel shifted onto his own side, and by the sound of his voice, he was facing Johnny. Because he was a freak. “You're not going to flip out in the middle of the night and karate chop my jugular are you?”

Johnny's face twisted and he turned around to show him the look. “What are you talking about?”

Daniel tucked an arm under his head. “Figure you're so tense," he reasoned, "you'll probably have some kind of crazy dream and I'm just saying, I don't want to be the collateral damage to your neuroses.”

“I don't have neuroses,” muttered Johnny, turning his cheek into the smooth fabric of the seat back. “I have problems. One problem, really. You.”

“I'm not even doing anything.”

“Yeah, well. Keep it that way.” He didn't even know what he was saying anymore. He thought if they could just keep talking, it might be alright. But that didn't work so well with the whole sleep plan, and anyway, Daniel had already closed his eyes.

Johnny stared at him in the close darkness, a little helpless not to despite the danger. He looked at his lashes, the soft curve of his mouth, the smooth line of his neck.

When he looked back up, Daniel's eyes were open and looking back at him, startlingly clear. Johnny stopped breathing.

Daniel blinked rapidly, and it was like he was processing a different emotion between each fall of his eyelids; Johnny was in no state to try to read any of them.

Slowly, though, the other boy started shifting closer.

He remained frozen while Daniel hesitantly slid up to him, erasing all the precious space between them. Daniel could do anything to him then, and he'd let him. Anything. Surely he was going to to hit him, or maybe he was going to—

Daniel fitted himself against his chest, hand coming up to fist loosely in the thick fabric of Johnny's sweater. He tucked his head under his chin and then just. Stayed there.

“Is this okay?” he whispered.

Johnny swallowed thickly; the other boy could probably feel it. He breathed in, made himself breathe out and keep going. He lifted his left arm and, scarcely daring to believe this was actually happening, he dropped it over Daniel's waist. The back under his palm was very warm, rising and falling gently with his breath.

Daniel's forehead pressed to his clavicle. They didn't speak again. Somehow, eventually, incredibly – Johnny's body betrayed him and he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

> okay, I swear that's the last one for today. holy shit, I need to get some actual work done...

Fellows Lake, 7:09 AM

Who was he to lay claim to a line between dreaming and waking when the only real change was in the light?

It filled the car, surrounded him, but he was not yet a person. A person had to open his eyes and get up and respond to that light, the world outside. He had to do nothing but continue to lie where he was and allow the hand on his head to keep combing through his hair.

He breathed in, let the air fill his lungs in that delicious comfortable way that meant the air would be put to good use, the only good use: that is, more sleeping.

He brought his knee up, hooked his calf around the other boy's leg like he was going to trip him. His right arm was asleep, completely useless; he wriggled and leaned heavy on the other boy's chest until he could flop it out to the side and then settled again.

“Every time I think you are about to wake up,” said the voice from the rib cage under one ear and in the air above the other, blending together to create something that was somehow both comforting and incredibly irritating, “but every time... nope. It's actually kind of amazing. Like, scientifically.”

“Uh huh,” he said. He didn't open his eyes.

“I know I can push you off if I needed to, like, piss. But you don't make it easy, man. You are heavy.”

“Squash you like a bug if you keep talking,” mumbled Johnny, because he was Johnny again. He gave a sigh that was more of a groan and retracted his body a few inches before giving up again. He pressed his cold nose to the other's warm arm; still refused to open his eyes.

Despite his threat, the hand in his hair did not stop. In fact, it reached back and dragged its nail lightly up the back of his skull.

Johnny twitched, his foot dancing along the ankle socket.

“Should I be concerned about you out in the world? I mean, if you make a habit of sleeping in your car, which apparently you do, I have to wonder – I mean, it begs the question, doesn't it. You being like this

in the mornings, it doesn't seem really safe. Anybody could come along and there you'd be, blinking up at them without any higher brain function, just not a care in the world."

"You're not anybody," he told the dream boy, because it was easier to pretend that was who he was talking to, who he was pressed up against. Simpler.

The hand in his hair paused. After a couple seconds, Johnny risked nudging back against it. Eyebrows pinched. He was dangerously close to waking. The light was growing stronger.

Don't make me wake up, he thought. Not yet.

After a long moment, the hand resumed its stroking. Johnny breathed out in relief. The light was pressing in against his eyelids, finding its way through the gaps in his lashes, but for a moment longer, he was perfectly safe.

Fellows Lake, 7:33 AM

Johnny rolled off, away. Knees banged against the side of the trunk.

He opened his eyes and looked up at Daniel, who looked back at him with this completely open expression, not asking or expecting or judging, just – looking at him, like it was possible to be with a person and just be with them, maybe.

Anyway, they looked at each other.

“Kata?” said Johnny at last.

“Yeah,” said Daniel, almost too quick.

Fellows Lake, 7:50 AM

Karate was walls made of mirrors for correcting your stance and form and maybe for remembering that somebody is always watching. It was vinyl mats that smelled like sweat and occasionally blood. It was returning attention with focus, and command with discipline. It was the weight of a gi on his shoulders and tightness of a headband around his forehead. It was pushing his body to its limit and learning with relief that limits themselves could be pushed.

Or maybe not.

Maybe karate could be dirt and grass under his bare feet, the smell of dew. It could be a pair of beat-up jeans and a half-buttoned plaid shirt and hair that he had to shake out of his eyes to track his partner's movements. It could be reaching into the wide, clear expanse of pale blue sky with a high-arcing kick. It could be seeing everything: the cranes on the opposite shore of the lake, the wind blowing through the changing leaves, and Daniel's intent gaze. And it could also be seeing none of these things, because sight was only images passing through his mind but vision came from within.

Afterwards, he fell back onto the ground and kind of laughed at how good he felt.

Daniel came to stand over him, mouth shaped into a quizzical smile. And when he offered his hand to help him up, Johnny was helpless to do anything but pull him tumbling down into a kiss.

Fellows Lake, 8:25 AM

On the few occasions Johnny imagined himself kissing another guy, he figured it would be like it was in the magazines and the one tape he got from a hole-in-the-wall shop in Chatsworth and watched five times in a row before destroying: hot, hard, and filthy; the necessary prelude to something a lot hotter, harder, and filthier.

He didn't imagine catching a lapful of Daniel LaRusso: the little huff of surprise punching out of his chest or the way it would feel just to cup his face when he pressed their lips together.

He didn't imagine how good it would feel for the other boy to bury his hands in his hair and kiss back like it wasn't even a question, like it was an extension of the million conversations they'd had; Johnny saying something and Daniel rising with a reply, of course, of course, of *course* he had a reply.

I think I want you, went Johnny's lips and Daniel's went *yeah, yeah* like he always said when he was letting Johnny get away with something.

They kissed on the ground until the sun came up over the treeline and warmed the clearing, gorgeous heat on the back of Johnny's neck.

He turned his head a little and said, “We should, ah,” stole another kiss, “We should probably go get breakfast. All we have in the car is like, half a bag of marshmallows.”

Daniel nosed along his jaw and nodded. “Yeah. I'm starving.”

But then somehow they were kissing again.

Disentangling was difficult, mostly on account of how Daniel kept backing up like he was going to finally get off him but then changing his mind half a foot away and lunging forward to bump into another kiss.

“Alright, alright,” said Johnny, scrambling up first to his knees and then standing, hands wrangling Daniel like this was a special rodeo event he had to get good at quick. At the moment, he was crap at it; Daniel stumbled him back against the Avanti with a renewed series of short, dragging kisses. “Jesus.”

Daniel only laughed into his mouth and twined an arm around his

neck.

The bulk of the Avanti tugged at his attention, and he broke his mouth free. “Hey, um,” he said, and licked the corner of his mouth. Then he kind of lost it a little watching Daniel watch him.

“Yeah? What is it?” said Daniel, leaning forward to place his mouth where his tongue had just been. It was almost a peck, and something about how comfortable it felt made his thoughts scatter again for another couple seconds.

He kissed Daniel, hands taking possession of his narrow hips. Eventually the feeling of the Avanti behind him reasserted itself, and he leaned back and said:

“You – you wanna drive?”

And Daniel stared, eyes widening and—

He threw his head back and laughed at him. Johnny hung on to his hips and tried to withstand it, tried glaring at him, because seriously, what the hell was so funny? But that only made the other boy laugh harder, face flushing from the force of it.

“Oh, *god*,” gasped Daniel at last. He bounced up on his toes and kissed Johnny again, his laughing breath ticklish on his face. “You fucking headcase. Yeah, I'll drive your car.”

Fellows Lake to Strafford

Happy was a good look on Johnny.

Daniel felt a little lightheaded with it, almost drugged by the idea that he looked that way because of him. It was an effort to keep moving forward past the milestone – a Stonehenge of milestones, really. He wanted to erect a massive mysterious ring of trilithons for people to wonder about in millennia's time. On the shore of this lake, Daniel kissed Johnny Lawrence and made him kinda happy.

They took the top back down, because it looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. Then Johnny settled almost gingerly in the passenger seat, like he was confused by the blank stretch of dashboard he found in front of him. This lasted only a few seconds; once Daniel got in behind the wheel, Johnny stretched his arm up over the back of the seats like he owned the place. Which Daniel guessed he kind of did, whatever.

Daniel smoothed his hands over the wheel, mostly curious if he could elicit a reaction from the maniac beside him. He looked over with just his eyes, not turning his head. Johnny scratched his face and shifted a little.

He bit back a grin.

“Okay,” said Johnny as he started the car, “you have to go gentle on the gears, it's been handling a little rough between second and third __”

He was not gong to drive the next couple hundred miles listening to this. There were limits. “You know I've already driven her, right?”

“Yeah, but I wasn't watching then,” said Johnny, as if that made some crucial difference.

Daniel nearly pressed his face to the wheel for a second. He slid a disbelieving look across at Johnny, who stared blankly back. Guy had a great poker face when he wanted to, but it hadn't stood the test of Daniel.

He dropped his hand to the gear stick and raised his eyebrows. “Like to watch, do you?”

“Oh my god.”

Johnny looked away, face going bright pink. Another good look on him. Daniel thought about leaning over and kissing him again, but his stomach was seriously hurting for some grub. The rest of the day stretched out in front of them, they couldn't be getting side-tracked every other minute.

Well. Probably shouldn't, anyway.

“Relax,” said Daniel with his smarmiest grin, flexing his hand. “I know my way around a stick.”

Johnny's hand behind his seat lifted and gently slapped him in the back of the head.

“Hey!”

“You deserved that,” said Johnny. He nodded out the windshield. “Let's go.”

They made it as far back as the paved road before Johnny told him to wait, because they couldn't go to Springfield.

“Why not?” he asked, nonplussed.

“Rule of road trips, no doubling back.”

He frowned. “I've never heard that before.”

“Big surprise," muttered Johnny. "Take a left when we get back to – what was it, 65?”

“Oh, no way, man,” said Daniel, putting the car in park. Johnny scowled at the gear stick like it had betrayed him. “If we're not going back to Springfield, then you're taking out my map and finding an actual route for us to use. We're not just picking random roads heading east and hoping for the best.”

Johnny looked like he was going to argue, bullheaded jackass that he was, so Daniel leaned as far as he could into his space without taking his seatbelt off. Johnny didn't lean back, but he looked at him a little warily.

Daniel smiled; Johnny's wariness grew. His eyes flicked down to Daniel's mouth.

Daniel opened the glove compartment and grabbed the map. He slapped it to the other boy's chest and said cheerfully, “Shotgun navigates, right?”

Johnny sighed. After a moment, he began to unfold the map.

Victory!

LaRusso: 1
Lawrence: 0

In the end they actually took a right on 65 and then cut east on a rinky-dink state highway before heading south again on a slightly less rinky-dink state highway. It all felt deeply silly to Daniel, this big unnecessary detour, but he figured he could indulge the other boy. He was big like that.

Plus it was enjoyable watching Johnny frown seriously at the map as he tracked their progress. Road trips: very serious business, apparently.

Daniel put his elbow out the window and smiled at the road.

Ozarks Family Restaurant

The diner they found in Strafford had a menu that was ten pages long and paper placemats on every table. Neither of them dared venture past the first two pages before deciding on the breakfast platter (three eggs, three links, three pieces of bacon, choice of toast, and grits or hashbrowns).

“What's grits,” said Johnny, propping his chin on his fist.

“It's like – poor man's polenta. And polenta was for poor men anyway, so like. Poor-*er* man's polenta.”

Johnny squinted at him. “What's polenta.”

“Just get the hashbrowns,” advised Daniel, closing the menu and sticking it back in the holder.

After they ordered, Daniel settled sideways in the booth, back against the wall and feet up on the seat, and he watched Johnny methodically destroy his placemat.

He started by folding the ruffled edges over and pressing his thumbnail to seal the crease. Then he folded it the other way and carefully tore the edges off until he had a plain-edged rectangle, which he then began to fold into a familiar shape.

Daniel watched his hands.

He had been watching them for some 1,500 miles at this point: fiddling with the radio dial or gripping the steering wheel, though more often than not he kept a light touch with the latter. Daniel had watched him steer with one hand at the bottom of the wheel; two fingers at 8 and 4; sometimes a single thumb. They were good hands, strong. And now he knew what those hands felt like holding onto him.

What he couldn't quite work out was why it didn't bother him more. Those hands have hurt him in the past. They could again.

He brought his eyes up to Johnny's face, intent upon his construction. Slight frown of concentration. His hair was in need of a cut, kept falling into his eyes.

Daniel had never exactly been the cave man type, for perhaps the obvious reasons. Touching was touching, and who cared about who

was taller so long as both parties were willing to take advantage of it? He'd crushed hard on a girl sophomore year who had a half a foot on him; would've done something about it too, if she hadn't been spectacularly disinterested.

Still, this was different. Johnny was a guy, a guy with a bad temper who knew karate. But Daniel hadn't been thinking about karate when he felt those hands wrap around his hips.

He wondered if Johnny could lift him. Bet he could.

“Okay,” said Johnny, looking up at him expectantly. After a second of Daniel staring back at him, his blue eyes flicked down meaningfully to Daniel's hands, lying relaxed atop the table. “Well?”

It still tore at Daniel, distantly, the idea that Johnny could just put his head down and continue moving along (probably at eighty miles per hour) like nothing was wrong, like he didn't have a broken heart. Did that make him resilient or the walking dead?

Johnny kicked his foot lightly, looking impatient. Daniel kicked back, less lightly. He would move when he damn well wanted to, Johnny.

Johnny dropped the paper football and collapsed back in the booth. His chin found his palm and his elbow the table, and he stared at Daniel unblinking.

Daniel drank some water and cleared his throat.

“Okay,” he said at last, bringing his hands up and putting his thumb together to form the goal posts. “Hit me with your best shot.”

And he did.

Johnny always did.

Strafford to Red Top

Daniel sat on the trunk of the Avanti on the edge of the diner parking lot, brushing his teeth and studying the crown of Johnny's head. The other boy was leaning next to him facing the other way, head down, scrubbing vigorously at his own teeth. His forearm was pressed to Daniel's thigh, a warm line of contact, and it felt like a secret. Innocent to outside eyes but they both knew differently.

“You should go, like, wash your hair in the gas station sink or something,” said Daniel around his toothbrush. “Since you couldn't at the hotel, I mean. I think the cut looks up to it.”

Johnny turned his head and spat foam onto the ground. “Okay.”

He knocked his knee into his ribs in what he thought was a companionable sort of way, and Johnny knocked his shoulder back into his. The back of his neck was a little red. He was going to make his gums bleed if he brushed any harder, Daniel thought.

He looked around. “Gonna be weird to finally leave the mountains behind. After this it's flat clear through to eastern Ohio.”

Johnny glanced up. “You wanna see anything before you leave it?”

Daniel leaned forward and spat. “What, you mean like – doing a hike, or something?”

Johnny shrugged. He took a mouthful of water from their canteen and swished it around before spitting again. He passed the canteen over to Daniel, who followed suit.

“I'll keep an eye out,” said Johnny. He nudged his hip, motioning for him to slip off the trunk so he could open it, and Daniel obligingly hopped down.

In the tiny restroom, Daniel stood by with their one towel thrown over his shoulder and watched as Johnny busied himself leaning over the sink to get his hair wet.

He cupped his hands under the meager flow of tap water and scraped it awkwardly over his head. He repeated this a couple times before

losing patience and trying to stick his whole head under the tap.

Daniel reached out and saved him before he could bump up against the faucet. Johnny went still, shoulder blades going tense under his shirt.

“Here, just – let me,” said Daniel. He would've swore in a court of a law that he hadn't suggested this whole thing with an ulterior motive in mind, but it was undeniable that his hands were not content to remain passive bystanders.

“Alright, well. Get on with it, then,” said Johnny after a moment, turning his reddened face to squint up at him. “Swear they built this sink for hobbits.”

“Ha, knew you'd read Tolkien,” said Daniel.

“Only the one with the dragon,” was the muttered response, which cut sharply off before he could finish the final syllable, because Daniel had cupped the back of his neck.

He guided Johnny's head over the sink one more and carefully sluiced the water over his hair until it was all wet. He grabbed the tube of shampoo and lathered some between his hands, and then he paused, thoughtful.

His mom used to do this for his dad; every other month or so she'd give him a trim, but before setting to it with a comb and pair of scissors, she'd wash his hair for him in the bathroom sink. Her hands covered in lather, turning his dad's thick head of dark hair into a foamy helmet. Daniel would wander past the open bathroom door, hearing them talk about the neighbors or work, anything and everything.

Daniel hadn't thought of that in years, or even knew he still had an image of it in his head. He cleared his throat and refocused his attention on the task at hand.

Johnny was still tense at the first touch, and Daniel figured it probably wasn't just because of the cut on the back of his head. So he went slow and deliberate, massaging his hands through the wet strands of blond hair, following the line of his skull up from his neck, across the sides to his temples.

From the slice of Johnny's down-turned face still visible to him, Daniel could see he'd closed his eyes. His hands, braced along either side of

the sink, had gone lax.

Daniel rinsed the shampoo out until the water streamed clear, and then he tugged the towel off his shoulder and wrapped the other boy's head in it. He'd kind of fallen into a meditative daze by that point, because he barely reacted when Johnny straightened up and turned on him.

They fell back against the door of the bathroom, Johnny's wet face pressed to his, mouth hungry; the towel like a veil between them and the world.

Okay, so maybe he'd one ulterior motive.

LaRusso: 2
Lawrence: 0

“Is that a map I see in your hands,” said Daniel, sliding behind the wheel once more. Johnny hadn't said anything about taking over driving, and he wasn't about to remind him.

“It's not a map, it's a pamphlet about Missouri state parks,” said Johnny, slouching down in the seat. He seemed to find it easier to cope with being the passenger if he didn't watch him drive, and Daniel didn't know if this was a judgment against his skills, worry over the Avanti or maybe – just maybe – that Johnny was so uncontrollably attracted to him that he knew he'd go crazy if he didn't look at something else instead.

Daniel licked his bottom lip, which felt a little tender by now, and thought: probably some mixture of all three.

Red Top to Lebanon

Over and around the curving road in the Ozarks, they got into a stupid almost-fight.

“You know, I think you said more when you were drunk and bleeding from the back of your head,” said Daniel. “Kind of figured you'd talk more if you weren't driving.”

“Why?” asked Johnny with open curiosity, blinking over at him. And when Daniel paused to think about the question, because why indeed, he added, “Is this like one of those jokes about walking and chewing gum, like I'm so dumb I can't drive and talk at the same time?”

“No,” said Daniel, refusing internally to feel shitty that he probably made at least one joke like that last year, because when you've gotten more than one shiner from a guy, he figured you're entitled. Like you've purchased the right to make those jokes. “Meant nothing by it, just that you're a pretty quiet guy, is all.”

Johnny shifted, long legs knocking together and falling apart again. He put his elbow up on the door and said, “Not everyone feels the need to fill every moment of the day with the sound of their own voice.”

“You saying I talk too much?”

“Pretty sure I've said it like twenty times since California.”

And yeah, he has, so it shouldn't sting at all. Just because it turned out someone wanted to kiss you, didn't mean they wanted everything else too. Daniel knew that, he'd dated people. He was a pro.

“Well, excuse me, Mr. Laconic,” he muttered.

“What's that mean, laconic,” said Johnny, a little annoyed.

And Daniel wasn't actually sure he'd used that right, he did kinda bad on his SATs. So instead of explaining, he said, “Guess I'll just shut up then.”

He shoved his sunglasses up his nose and set his hand on the wheel – 10 and 2, because he was a good driver, he could drive for the state, his record was so good. Or maybe he'd become a taxi driver back in Jersey. Then he could talk all he wanted; taxi drivers never shut the

hell up. It was like, part of the charm. He'd get to talk to like a million people a day, and they'd never get sick of him because they were always leaving. It would be perfect. If Mr. Miyagi didn't come back, that's exactly what he'd do. New York City taxi driver, the Big Apple.

“It's okay that you talk so much,” said Johnny abruptly. “I don't mind.”

And here was the problem with Johnny Lawrence; Daniel had no idea what he was thinking most of the time. The kissing was the first real thing he thought they understood each other on – well, second. Karate would always come first.

“Oh,” said Daniel. “Big of you.”

“I think it is,” he said mildly, “given how much of your talking is just like. Bitching about me, or at me.”

“Honestly, I didn't think you were listening most of the time.”

“I listen to everything you say.”

Daniel wondered if this was part of the liking guys thing, what made it different than liking girls – the bodies were different, sure, yeah, whatever – but never in his experience had he wanted to kiss someone while also wanting to shove them out of a moving vehicle.

“Okay,” said Johnny, after Daniel had sent him enough disbelieving looks, “that was a lie. I don't listen, but it sounded good, and – and I wanted it to be true.”

And Daniel didn't know what to do with that.

Lebanon to Teardrop Rd

Johnny studied the state parks pamphlet for a long time: knees jumping, guy was hyperactive as shit. But he never suggested any turn off Route 66, so Daniel didn't know what was going on there.

He was feeling a little antsy, himself; at some point they were going to shoot out of the Ozarks part of the state entirely and that'd be it – good-bye the South, just like it had been good-bye the West; with no fanfare, them not realizing it was actually over until it was fifty miles in the rearview. And once they were in the Midwest, that was – well, it was the Midwest. Hard to say if anything was ever ending or beginning in the Midwest.

Daniel preemptively decided that he probably didn't like the Midwest.

“So, tell me something,” said Johnny, still moving a little restlessly. He sat up in his seat and glanced at Daniel. “When did you... you know.”

Daniel watched the road and waited for him to continue. When he didn't, he looked at Johnny. “I don't know.”

His expression twisted. “You don't know?”

“What you're talking about,” clarified Daniel. “So? Use your words, man.”

“Dick.” Johnny shook his head and looked out the side of the car. “Okay. When did you know that you, you know – shut up, oh my god,” even though Daniel hadn't even said anything, he'd only smirked a little, “when did you know you – liked guys. Okay? There. Jesus.” His left ear was red, and Daniel had the most bizarre impulse to reach over and tweak it.

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that.”

He tapped the wheel and considered his options. Eventually he went with the truth. “A few days ago, I suppose.”

Johnny's eyes jerked back to him so fast, Daniel was a little worried he was going to give himself whiplash. “A *few* – what do you mean, a few days ago?”

“Are we just going to sit here and repeat what the other says back at him until we get to Chicago?” Daniel asked. “Because, man, there are better things we could be doing with our mouths, I'm just saying. Yeah, a few days ago, what's the big deal?”

“So how do you even know you like guys?”

He shrugged. “The kissing seemed like probably a good sign? But maybe that's just me.” And then, because Daniel was pretty quick on the uptake and realized they were verging into sensitive territory here, he said, “Look, I've never really spent much time thinking about that kind of stuff, worrying about it. Never thought there was anything wrong with it, maybe this is why, I don't know. But hey, everyone knows the best dance clubs are the queer ones—”

“What are you blabbing on about?” demanded Johnny. “You expect me to believe you've been to – you know, dance clubs?”

“Why not? Newark had some great ones. Cactus Club. Club Zanzibar, I'm pretty sure was at least a little bit queer.”

“There's no way they would've let you in. If you were, what, at the most seventeen, that meant you probably looked fourteen, and no one's gonna let a fourteen-year-old into a dance club.”

“Maybe I showed them some of my moves on the sidewalk outside, and they decided to make an exception,” said Daniel.

“I can't believe you've never even thought about it,” said Johnny, apparently switching back to not listening to him. “I mean, you let me – you let me—”

“Who's letting anybody,” said Daniel, offended. “What the hell are you talking about? *Letting*. Next time we stop, you gonna stand back and *let* me climb you like a jungle gym? Do I gotta start worrying you're not into it?”

Johnny crossed his arms, face going pink. “But that's it, exactly, isn't it. You're so competitive, maybe this is all some insane thing in your insane mind, like you're not *into* it, you just want to *win* at it.”

“That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard come out your mouth, and that's saying something.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Daniel thought about apologizing, but then he thought over what he'd said and figured he

had nothing to apologize for; it wasn't his fault Johnny had his hang-ups. And, sure, he had reason, given what happened with his asshole of a stepdad. Daniel was over here trying to be sensitive about it, step lightly and all that, but that didn't mean he wanted any part of those feelings. No, thank you. Nothing in his life would be helped by him suddenly questioning and doubting himself left and right. If it felt right, do it; that's what he said. It was called being emotionally intelligent, Johnny, you should try it some time.

“I don't believe it,” said Johnny.

“Well, maybe you should try,” said Daniel loudly. “Try believing just a little. How many times does a guy gotta kiss you before you accept he wants to? Do I gotta stick my hand down your jeans? I'll do it, I mean, I was gonna wait a little, I'm a gentleman—”

“No – Jesus, shut up,” said Johnny. He was staring in the side mirror: whole body jerked up from the seat, tense. He twisted around in the seat and stared at the road behind them.

Daniel transferred his gaze to the rearview mirror. After a second, he said, “No fucking way.”

“It is, it's gotta be,” breathed Johnny, and it was hard to say if he sounded pissed or exhilarated.

Behind them, coming up fast: a blue Pontiac Firebird.

Devil's Elbow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It's the same one, you're *sure*? Like, you're one hundred percent positive.”

“Same plates,” said Johnny tersely, not looking away from the side mirror.

“You memorized his license plate?” asked Daniel, almost impressed in spite of himself.

“Okay, no – but it was an Arizona plate starting with the letters G-A. Whatever. It's gotta be the same guy.”

Daniel looked between the road and the mirrors. He gripped the wheel. “You think he's been following us? I mean, what are the odds?”

“Don't know. I mean, we're both doing Route 66, I guess? So it's not that crazy.”

Behind them, the Pontiac's engine roared and the other driver made his move; Daniel could practically feel Johnny go tense beside him as it shot forward into the other lane. He didn't get a good look at the driver as he passed. He was going too fast.

Johnny said nothing, but his jaw was tight.

The Firebird swept back into the right lane ahead of them, and a middle finger appeared in the air out the window.

And Johnny said *nothing*.

He was practically vibrating in the other seat, spine likely attuned to whatever frequency of asshole the other car was giving off. His knuckles were pressed white, and he didn't look at Daniel. It was possible he wasn't even breathing.

Daniel watched the Firebird pull away ahead of them. Precious yards of road opening up between the two cars. He flashed on Johnny in the roadhouse that night, expression serious, almost reverent as he dragged Daniel in close, trying with beer-fueled sincerity to help him

understand. And the whole thing should've been laughable, but the look in his eyes killed any desire in Daniel to laugh, because *if you're worthy, you don't ignore it. You can't.*

Do you belong here? Johnny had said: *Do you belong on this road? Do you deserve this car?* And Daniel didn't give a damn about any of that. He wasn't Johnny, he had no strange romantic notions about highways; the question he heard now was a different one entirely.

Do you deserve him?

Daniel's jaw firmed. His left foot went to the clutch, anticipatory; his hand dropped to the gear stick.

He floored it.

There was a metaphor in it somewhere, he'd think later.

To the left, sometimes as close as to be in spitting distance, ran the interstate – a divided 4-lane freeway where traffic could flow smoothly and sedately from city to city, isolated from such inconvenient things like communities or nature or other people.

Route 66 was a crumbling at-grade road winding up and over hills, through fading towns. Eventually it might become a literal road to nowhere, but that day the two cars ate up the blacktop like they couldn't wait to arrive.

It wasn't a question of speed, was the thing Daniel figured out real quick.

“Keep cool,” Johnny kept saying. “Whatever you do, just keep cool.”

And Daniel wanted to tell him to shut up, but for once in his life he didn't have any urge to speak. Everything in him was focused on the car, the space between them and the Firebird.

He overtook him once just before the highway crossed the river below, but it was too easy, like the other driver was letting him. He figured out why as they got to the second turnoff for Teardrop Road

heading back to Devil's Elbow, and the Firebird pressed up into the other lane.

Daniel looked at the rapidly shrinking space between the two cars. “Is he—”

“Oh, *fuck* this guy,” said Johnny. He was nearly off the seat, craning his head.

The Firebird pressured them onto the other road, a barreling skidding turn Daniel handled badly, braking too late and causing the rear of the car to jerk to the side, sloppy fishtail stealing momentum. He and Johnny rocked sideways, elbows bumping hard.

The Firebird peeled ahead and Daniel chased after: angry, finally, because that had actually been kinda dangerous. He brought the Avanti up in the other lane, solid double yellow lines warning him off, a warning he ignored, because his pulse was pounding and he wanted the other guy to pay.

Coming up quick on the road ahead, another bridge loomed up: an old truss-bridge, its metal supports looking like something meant to trap a rodent. A large truck coming the other direction had just entered the other side.

“Daniel,” said Johnny.

He kept his foot on the gas and pulled the Avanti even with the Firebird. He wanted to look over, but he didn't take his eyes off the oncoming truck.

“Daniel.” And Johnny sounded impossibly tense, but Daniel knew he wouldn't do anything. Somehow he just knew it.

Guardrails sprang up along the sides of the road as they neared the river. Trapping them in, no other direction to go now but forward. The Firebird stuck it out, so he did as well. Who was this guy, anyway? Had he ever ran out into a typhoon and climbed a pole to get a crying girl? Had he ever faced down a desperate knife-wielding guy who wanted to kill him? Did he know anything about life but this cheap glory of the road crap?

The truck was laying on its horn by then; Daniel could see it start to hit its brakes, red flickering from the back.

Physics problem assigned senior year, they had to calculate the kinetic

energy produced from a headlong collision of two vehicles heading in opposite directions. A small increase in velocity could more than quadruple the kinetic energy. So, too, could an increase in mass. Say a semi-truck collided with a car going 83 miles per hour; it would produce – well, a fuckload of kinetic energy. A real fuckload.

"*Daniel—*"

The other driver slammed on his brakes. The Firebird dropped back.

Daniel swung into the right lane ahead of the oncoming semi-truck, and the proximity of the horn sent his ears ringing. They shot out the other side of the bridge. It had only been seconds.

Johnny threw off his seatbelt and rose up on his knees to holler and whoop back at the Firebird, now meekly falling to legal speed. Vanquished.

"How do you like that," he shouted, raising both his middle fingers and saluting with them. Three times. "That's what I fuckin' thought!"

Daniel didn't think he could feel his limbs.

Chapter End Notes

> I would like to dedicate the idiocy on display in this chapter to the maniac I raced for about 20 miles along a Colorado highway the summer I was seventeen. The final time I overtook him, my friend and I looked back to see the guy, no lie, headbanging energetically over his steering wheel. Neither of us were driving cool cars, and we both definitely deserved to lose our licenses.
>
> O Bro of the Blacktop, where art thou now?

The Avanti

The aftershock of almost dying hit them both at once.

“Pull over,” said Johnny, tone brooking no argument. He pointed at a weed-lined dirt road curling off to the left, barely a road at all. “There, take that.”

“Good idea,” said Daniel, turning. “My heart feels like it's going to burst outta my chest, Alien-style. Y'know, I've had adrenaline rushes before, but this. This is something else. That bridge? That, that was kinda close!” He put the car in park and cut the engine. “I mean, I think in part I only did it because—”

Johnny hauled him across the seats. One hand around his arm and the other clamping tight around the back of his thigh as he lifted, and yeah, turned out he could definitely pick Daniel up.

And more on that later, because Daniel had to get with the picture quick here: time for more kissing, alright, that's more like it. Why hadn't they been doing this all day? Did Johnny think he was some kind of nun, what the hell. And then Daniel was thinking about that one Billy Joel song and Catholic girls, was he the Catholic girl in this situation, and okay, it wasn't like he did it on purpose, it wasn't for lack of trying, but there's such a thing as trying too hard and when it was girls you didn't want to be too insistent—

Johnny rose up and twisted them, pinning Daniel against the seat. He reached down and did something and the seat reclined back and okay, okay, okay. This was happening, fuck yes, this was finally happening.

Or was it? Johnny just stared at him.

Daniel made a face and pulled at his shirt, his arms, his shoulders, but he resisted, something like a smirk breaking across his face. And fine if the mountain won't come to him, he'll scale the fucking mountain.

He got as far as wrapping his legs around his waist, about to attempt the world's hottest inverted sit up, because other people have abs too, Johnny. But then Johnny finally bent down and started kissing him again and there. That was more like it.

Good boy, Johnny.

...There was something about feeling the other boy over him, the weight of his body, the span of his chest. Daniel wanted to wear him like a blanket.

It was less about being pinned, unable to move, and more about being covered. Seemed like the world would feel like a better place from that vantage point, and yeah, alright, maybe he liked it, maybe he loved it, maybe he wanted to be a little cherished. Lying under Johnny, taking a bruising kiss and giving it right back, there was no doubting he had his full attention.

Johnny backed off, shaking off Daniel's *hey, no* grasping hands like they were flies or something. He shuffled a little awkwardly down into the foot well, back hitting the dash, and he started – he started working Daniel's fly. His hands were shaking a little, and he struggled with the jean button.

“Well, hey,” joked Daniel, because he'd never claimed not to be, on occasion, a complete fucking idiot, “I see you're not worried about me letting you. That's progress.”

Johnny looked up, and Daniel's mouth went dry at the look in his eyes.

“Let me,” said Johnny.

And Daniel couldn't respond.

Honestly it was probably for the best.

Johnny got the shorts unzipped and dragged them down, Daniel lifting his hips to help because he was a team player like that.

He didn't know what to do with his hands. Putting them on Johnny's head seemed like a great option, but also a little demanding, and it wasn't that he minded being a little demanding, in fact he kind of got the impression Johnny liked it, and more on that later.

Whenever he'd imagined someone handling his dick for the first time, and he'd imagined it a lot, even his ego hadn't pictured the girl being all that into it. Just – dicks, right? The punchline of human anatomy. There were plenty of things about male bodies he could get behind, like apparently he was really into, like, hands? And long thighs, and the strange trick of geometry that was Johnny's shoulder-to-waist ratio, what was up with that.

Anyway, Johnny seemed to be really into his dick. After a moment, Daniel had to stop looking at his face, because honestly it seemed like kind of a private moment. Get a room, why don't you, jeez.

“Uh,” said Daniel, when it had been, what, that was at least ten seconds. “Not to interrupt your admiration, I mean, I know, my dick belongs in a museum. Should make a cast of it and sell it up in Chatsworth, maybe I wouldn't be so broke all the time—”

Johnny took him into his mouth and Daniel. Daniel shut up.

For like, five seconds.

It was a hard reboot.

Okay, no, seriously, just – just give him a moment.

He really hoped this was as good for Johnny as it was for him, he needed it to be because he kind of needed Johnny to never stop, never stop touching him. Not touching him was gonna be designated a crime, a misdemeanor at least but Daniel wasn't above getting a line to the president and explaining the situation. He'd take it federal, he'd take it to the United fucking Nations if he had to, that was how much he needed Johnny to keep doing – that, yeah, just like that, what the fuck, how had he not known this. That it could be like this. Life, what? What the hell. How. It was just – so much, right, and maybe there was a reason for everything and that reason was Johnny's mouth.

(And all of a sudden it seemed wrong that he wasn't giving Johnny anything back, because he wanted to make him feel this good, he wanted to make it good for Johnny, so good it obliterated all bad thoughts forever, so he never looked like he had under that overpass in the rain. He wanted Johnny like this always, hungry but content

because Daniel had him, he had him, he was gonna take care of him. How did he let him know this, it seemed very important that he let him know, but he was kind of busy right now and okay, more on that later.)

Daniel had a modicum of self-awareness, okay, he knew he should probably stop talking. Who knew what would come out of his mouth next, and sure, maybe Johnny had tuned him out, god please Johnny, he hoped he was tuning this out, because Daniel was about twenty seconds from proposing they move in together and stay together long enough to claim a common law marriage, and then Johnny could blow him all the time and Daniel would cook and they'd haggle over the chores, that wasn't particularly important and anyway, Daniel was used to chores.

He lost control of his hands then, because when your spine is being rewired via your dick, you need to hold on to something, and that something might as well be Johnny's precious, dumb little golden head. He dragged his fingers through his soft floppy hair, and thank fuck he'd washed it earlier, what a great idea, Daniel always had the best ideas, like getting into this car back in California, really, what a—what a—

The noise he made when he came was really embarrassing, and he didn't understand why he had to be there to hear it.

Right after, Johnny bumped his nose against his belly and followed it up with a short kiss, and somehow that was both the worst and best part of the whole thing.

Daniel couldn't talk because Daniel didn't have any breath left. Grab the emergency air compressor and attach it to his lungs, stat.

He couldn't believe he lost his virginity in a car. What was this, Night

Moves? Black-haired beauty with big dark eyes getting heavy out in the woods? He was describing himself now, did that make Johnny Bob Seger?

Johnny rose up over him again: coming home from the front lines of the war for a kiss, and okay, Daniel was fine being the chick. Hey, there, sweetheart. Kiss him once, and kiss him twice, and then kiss him once again, because it's been a long, long time.

The Motherfuckin' Avanti!!

So Daniel didn't know what he was doing, but when has that ever stopped him. He was a quick study; think about it this way, one day he barely knew how to kick, was reading about how to do it from a, a freaking library book, right, and then a few months later, boom, he was champion of the whole Valley!

“Why are you bringing that up now?” demanded Johnny.

Right. Sorry.

Daniel continued shoving him over into the back seat, and if the other boy was disgruntled, well, he'd make it up to him. He'd make it up to him all. Day. Long.

“I mean, we probably need to get back on the road at some point,” said Johnny, relaxing back sideways over the bench seat. He put an arm behind his head, looking completely unsuspecting. Like he hadn't realized yet that Daniel was about to blow his fucking mind.

“Oh,” said Johnny, glancing down to his own lap, like he was surprised to see an erection there, crying out for release from its denim prison. “That's – it's, y'know. I mean, it's alright, you don't have to—”

Daniel put his hand over the dick, and that shut him up. Not that it was really hard to do that, Johnny didn't really speak a whole lot in the regular course of things. Daniel wondered if he could get him to speak more during sex. Like maybe lower his inhibitions a little, get him babbling, what would he say?

Anyway: that sure was a dick under his hand.

“Been thinking,” said Daniel.

“I'll bet,” said Johnny, voice a little reedy. His whole body was suddenly strung tight, and he avoided Daniel's eyes, and what was that, that was no good. Hey, eyes up here, what's he gotta do, strip?

Maybe he should strip.

Anyway, Johnny didn't seem like he knew how to be touched, and it was weird, because he had friends, didn't he, friends who were always doing the bro hugs thing. (No one ever gave Daniel bro hugs; he just

didn't give off the right vibes, or something.) So why was he here, now, acting like someone who'd been locked away in a box for half his life? Is this why they called it a closet? Get out of the fucking closet, Johnny, it's nice out here.

Daniel considered the dick, thoughtfully running his fingers along the soft denim.

“I can't believe you're humming right now,” muttered Johnny, covering his eyes with his hand. Daniel reached up and tugged his hand down, because seriously. Eyes front, soldier.

Right, Johnny asked for it. (Well, no. He didn't, and that was the problem, did Daniel have to do everything here? He was going to teach this guy how to ask for it. That's right.)

Daniel took his hand away from the dick and dragged his shirt up over his head. Behold! You sad closeted headcase. Your Ganymede is ready for worship.

Johnny looked at his chest and away again, cheeks reddening. “What the fuck is a Ganny – what you just said?”

He was a dude, a Trojan dude who was so fucking hot, Zeus – you know who Zeus was, you philistine? Zeus saw him and was like, oh wow. So he kidnapped him, because that was kind of his thing, like guy should've been brought up on charges, probably. Anyway, Trojans were like, the pre-Romans, which means they were basically Italian, so I don't feel like I'm really stretching here, you get me?

“Not even a little bit.”

So Daniel got on with things; he didn't know what he was doing, but he figured instinct didn't steer him wrong too often. He arranged his knees as best as he could, one between the other boy's legs, feet awkwardly bumping up against the side of the car in the air, and then he stretched out over Johnny.

After a moment, he reached beneath him to ruck up Johnny's shirt, and yeah, that was better, wasn't that better? He pressed a kiss to the side of his neck, keeping his lips soft.

Right, back to that dick.

He was pretty smooth in undoing the front of Johnny's jeans one-handed. That was hot, that was pretty hot, also: Johnny is so hot? Did

he know how many times Daniel had sat there and wondered about this? Like, not a weird amount of times, he wasn't some kind of creep, but yeah, a good amount. Because Johnny had this way of sitting when he was driving that drove him a little crazy, the way he spread his thighs like he was just begging for someone's hand to slip along the inseam, help itself out. Though not actually begging, of course, because as he has already established, Johnny doesn't beg.

“Begging you to shut up,” said Johnny, throat jumping, gulping.

He didn't want Daniel to shut up.

(Pretty sure.)

Daniel slid a hand beneath his waistband, and curled his leg up over Johnny, like he could cradle him through this. Easy, easy, there he goes. He's doing good, he's doing so good.

“You,” gritted out Johnny, turning his face into Daniel's hair, “are – so – fucking *weird*.”

Daniel retracted his hand and licked his palm. That seemed to smooth things along. Did Johnny ever think about how they both used to have foreskins, like they were born with these little sleeves that probably made this whole thing a *lot* easier, built-in lubrication for jerking off, didn't that sound amazing? Like, the collective population of men outside the Abrahamic world were probably still laughing their asses off about that one every day, and Daniel didn't blame them. But it was okay this way, it was fine, wasn't it, because there could be something intimate about doing it like this. Like sometimes putting in that extra bit of effort just meant you were more present.

How did that feel, Johnny?

To be honest, Daniel hadn't spent a whole lot of time thinking about Johnny's dick, but that was before he met it. Now that he knew what it felt like in his hand, he didn't think he'd be overlooking it again any time soon. And Johnny was going to be ready for him whenever he wanted it, wasn't he?

Johnny huffed out a breath over his hair. His chest rose and fell quickly; Daniel felt his ribcage expand against his stomach, and it was fascinating what turned him on these days. He bent his head and closed his mouth over one of Johnny's hard nipples.

Hm. No, nothing? Yeah, he didn't know either. Nipples were weird.

Johnny was doing great. Daniel wanted him so much, could he feel that, could he feel how bad he wanted him? Because Daniel's dick didn't give up easy, you knock it down, it'll get right back up again.

Daniel rolled his hips a little, just a little, just to take the edge off. He licked and kissed Johnny's neck, and he wanted to speed his hand up almost as bad as Johnny probably wanted him to, but they both needed to be a little more patient, okay. Daniel got this. He got Johnny, and he was going to keep on getting him for as long as he thought necessary.

Johnny was doing so, so great. Did he know how much sex they were going to have now? Chicago was like, what, ten hours or something? It had been a while since he checked the map, but anyway, that left a lot of road for orgasms. And Daniel was going to take to it like a vocation, it was going to be his new calling in life. New road game: see a McDonald's, get a kiss. See a white car, get a kiss. Pass a mile marker, get a kiss, sensing the pattern yet, Johnny?

Johnny's knees were jumping a little now, his hands clenching and releasing at his sides. C'mon man. Daniel dragged his mouth up his jaw to his ear, grip tightening. C'mon, Johnny. He was doing good, he was doing so good, but he knew what Daniel wanted to hear, what Daniel wanted, c'mon, Johnny, be a good boy. Be a good boy, and Daniel would give him the world. Be a good boy, and Daniel would join a rodeo and train until he knew all the tricks and could lasso the moon for him. Be a good boy, like he knew he could be—

“Please,” said Johnny, throwing his head back, knocking it into the side of the car and not seeming to notice or care. “God, please, please, Daniel, *please*—”

There he goes. That wasn't so hard, now, was it?

Daniel shuffled down his body. He tried to be gentle with the jeans, but Johnny apparently didn't have any patience for gentle, because his hands were fast and rough as he shoved them down, and seriously, Johnny, chill out. They had all the time in the world.

“Well, here goes nothing,” said Daniel, and then no more, because his mouth was kinda busy.

Daniel turned his face into Johnny's stomach and maybe hummed a

little again. There was a hand in his hair, and it was nice. And he came again, and that was really nice, and he was not going to mention it to Johnny because the other boy probably had opinions about spunk and his leather seats.

“We uh. We should get going,” said Johnny.

“Alright,” said Daniel, not moving. “I supposed I have a couple hundred miles left in me.”

“Oh, you're not driving,” came the very final reply, “Are you kidding? You nearly drove my car into a truck. You're insane.”

Teardrop Rd to Crocker

Johnny's life was full of troubles.

He didn't ask for things, mostly because he didn't think he'd get them, and even if he did – it was a lesson he learned years ago, when Sid was trying to buy his mom through him – even if he did, it was never, ever what he thought it would be like. So why bother, right?

Except.

Except Daniel.

He wasn't sure how they got here. It was almost like normal: him back where he belonged behind the wheel. But time and space weren't moving normally, and somehow Daniel had squeezed himself onto Johnny's lap between his chest and the wheel and, well.

Well – fucking *Daniel*.

His right knee hung out of the open door, preventing it from closing, and his left knee pinched in against Johnny's waist. He kept dropping his hips, nudging, like he could defeat the laws of the universe and get closer than he already was, and his hands held Johnny's face like it was something impossibly delicate, even as his tongue delved liked it was searching for treasure, and just – Jesus. *Jesus*.

“You know I can't drive like this,” said Johnny, turning his head to get some air.

“Driving's overrated,” said Daniel, undeterred and turning his attention to Johnny's neck, what the fuck, “like this country really needs better mass transit, do you know what'd it be like if you could take a train everywhere?” And how did he put so many words out into the world while kissing, it was like some kind of freak show act from the nineteenth century. He had a secret third lung or something.

“What— train, *what*?”

He was lost, and somehow vaguely put off. He was pretty sure Americans didn't fight and die in World War II just so they could clutter the country up with trains. And why were they even talking about this? He had never been so consistently confused and turned on in his life, and it was probably bad for his health.

Daniel grabbed his face and made him look at him. “Don't worry about it,” he said, very seriously, and then he was kissing him again, and jesus, they were never, ever leaving this place.

Eventually, like – okay, really, eventually – Johnny realized he had to be the strong one, because clearly Daniel was some kind of sex fiend, the kind that they warned about in the film reels they would show in health class. What a freak.

Johnny detached the tentacles around his neck with effort and braced himself with a hard exhale before tossing the other boy across the car.

“Seriously, man?” said Daniel, fetched up against the passenger door.

“Don't – look, shut up,” said Johnny, not looking over. He wiped his face. He adjusted the rearview mirror. “Jesus Christ.”

“...Whatever,” muttered Daniel, but he was shifting to grab his seatbelt so, like: okay. Okay.

They were okay.

Johnny put his hand behind the passenger seat to reverse down the dirt road, but this meant having to look in Daniel's direction on the way to looking backwards, and having to see his stupid, sulky expression.

“You haven't talked in almost thirty seconds,” said Johnny, starting to reverse. “You okay over there?”

“Real funny, you're hilarious.”

And then his lip did this pursing thing, pushing out a little, it was – it was a pout, it was a fucking pout and Johnny was so, so fucking screwed. How did he walk himself into this. This was going to end in disaster, just like everything always did.

He reached over the seat and tousled Daniel's hair, and it wasn't even a conscious decision, *that's how screwed he was.*

Daniel batted his hand away. “Hey, don't start something if you're not

gonna finish it, pal."

No one on the face of the planet had ever been more screwed than Johnny.

"You're going the wrong direction," said Daniel, as Johnny turned left onto Route 66.

"No, I'm not."

"Yeah, pretty sure you are. This is south, we're heading south right now. Chicago is north. Also, how are questioning me on this? I literally just drove us past here a couple hours ago. You think I wouldn't notice? I was focused on the Firebird, sure, but that didn't mean I wasn't paying any attention to my surroundings. I clearly remember this bridge, and that tree, and the bend coming up—"

"I'm taking a little detour," said Johnny. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it, who said I was worried."

Johnny said nothing.

"Is this detour going to involve more sex?"

He was so fucking screwed.

Crocker to Camdenton

“You should, uh,” said Johnny, lifting a hand and waving it vaguely, “look at the scenery. Save it up for when you're stuck on some godforsaken toll road out east.” He didn't know the particulars, but he assumed there'd be one. It was a dark corner of the country. He'd never been on a turnpike before, but he imagined it was what people drove on all the time in *1984*. He didn't really remember that book too well, but that assumption felt right.

“Oh, believe me, I'm looking,” said Daniel, and Johnny didn't glance at him, because he already knew that tone. It was a new one, but somehow also deeply familiar, like maybe he'd always known this part of the other boy.

When Johnny didn't say anything, Daniel continued, “I'm ah, real appreciative. Of the scenery.”

His lips tightened, and he put his head down to stare at the road.

“Has the scenery considered driving in just his underwear again?” Yep, that's what he thought. “Because that was wild, and I feel like I didn't get a chance to appreciate it properly yesterday. Was trying to be a gentleman and all.”

“A gentleman,” he breathes, shaking his head.

“But then, it just hit me,” said Daniel, and suddenly he was out of his seatbelt, the little fucker had broke free and was plastering himself to Johnny's side, hand going to his thigh. He dragged his nose up Johnny's neck and said, “this is Johnny Lawrence we're talking about. He doesn't go for gentlemen.”

He didn't understand how it was possible to feel so embarrassed and so turned on at the same time.

“And what does he go for?” he asked the road, maybe giving in to a second of weakness and tilting his head.

“...Karate champions with amazing flexibility?” Johnny could hear it in his voice: the struggle between choosing the smarm or the brag. The brag won, apparently.

He reached up with his left hand, planted it over Daniel's face, and

shoved him back across the car.

“Okay, okay, I get if you don't want to pull over and go through the hassle of taking off your jeans – how about your shirt?”

“A few days ago you were on my case about sunburns, now you want me to take off my shirt?” And then he realized what he's walked right into, god, he was so stupid sometimes—

“Don't worry, I got you covered on the sunscreen front. Or I will, anyway. Both hands. You wouldn't even have to stop driving,” the last part said like Daniel was making him an irresistible offer, and wouldn't he be a dope to refuse it.

“I'm not taking off my shirt,” he said, and at this point he wasn't even sure why he was arguing. It was arguing for arguing's sake, because it made this all feel more normal.

And if he was being normal, and Daniel was being normal, it felt safe; it was something he could understand.

Camdenton to Ha Ha Tonka

They stopped at a gas station just outside Camdenton on their way into the state park, because it was time to fill the tank and also grab some snacks.

Johnny was getting kind of sick of jerky and chips, and he honestly never thought he'd say that. It felt a little like being betrayed by a close and personal friend. So he wandered the two small food aisles, looking at his options. Maybe he should become a nut person?

He picked up a bag of honey roasted cashews and glanced up to see Daniel considering a box of condoms, and then he was dropping a bag of honey roasted cashews.

He turned quickly around and pretended he hadn't seen anything. Grabbed a couple bags of nuts blindly and made his way to the cash register. Might have accidentally handed over a ten dollar bill, he wasn't sure of anything just then.

Back in the Avanti, he sat at the wheel and stared out the windshield at the rolling hills.

“Hey, uh, did you know you're still hooked up to the pump?” said Daniel, walking up.

“Oh?” he said, aiming for casual. He scraped a hand over the side of his head and glanced over and, no, that was a mistake. Big mistake. He felt like it was written on his forehead: I saw you looking at condoms.

He wondered if he bought them.

Daniel paused, hand on the pump. He tilted his head and peered at Johnny quizzically for a long moment before shaking his head and muttering under his breath. He replaced the pump, turned the cap back in place, and hopped into the car.

Johnny was going to be the first boy ever to die of whatever was the opposite of blue balls. And they wouldn't even charge Daniel with his murder, because that kid got away with everything.

“So what's the deal with this place?” said Daniel, knees up on the dash as he flipped through the park pamphlet. “We got lakes, we got bluffs, we doing a hike? Are we doing a hike? Hey, they have caves – Johnny, are we—”

“We're not having sex in a cave.”

Resounding silence from the passenger seat.

“C'mon, think about it, man,” he said, a little impatiently, “it'd be cold, wet, and dark. Does that sound like fun to you?”

“Bet I could make it fun,” muttered Daniel.

Johnny widened his eyes at the road and kept driving, looking for the right trailhead parking lot. After a moment, he snatched the pamphlet away, because he didn't want Daniel reading about it before seeing it.

Daniel was completely unsuspecting on the walk up to the top of the bluff; he kept turning around to look back down at the lake, or checking to see if the coast was clear before slapping Johnny's ass and then sprinting away before he could get smacked.

But then eventually they'd climbed high enough for the trees to no longer cover everything, and Daniel went quiet.

“What – is that—”

“A castle, yeah,” said Johnny. “It's a castle.”

“Why is there a castle in *Missouri*?”

“Some crazy rich guy in the past, I don't know.”

They walked closer and uncovered more of the ruins. Johnny kept one eye on Daniel's expression, waiting for it: the moment of realization.

Daniel stopped walking. He looked around; it was off-peak season and there weren't any other people around. “Johnny,” he said, voice strange.

“Mm?”

“Johnny, are we going to have sex in a castle?”

He'd actually intended to have a picnic, but – well. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Yes, Daniel. We can have sex in the castle.”

Ha Ha Tonka

“Okay, this is pretty cool,” said Daniel, wandering through what might've been the entrance hall. “You get a point for this.

Johnny wheeled around and cocked his head at him through the empty square of what once had been a window. “A point? You're awarding points?”

Daniel spread his hands. “Maybe.”

“How many do I have?”

“...Two. I made an official decision that all instances of sexual congress would be ineligible, because I figured it would kind of blow the curve, if you get me.” He gave Johnny a look that made it impossible for one to misunderstand.

Johnny narrowed his eyes. “Two. And how many you have?” And when Daniel only smirked and shrugged and backed up a step, he came around the half-crumbled wall. “How many points did you give yourself? You little punk, how many points?”

Daniel laughed and backed up again, and Johnny gave in and ran him down. Got him around the middle and turned, tumbling them to the ground.

Daniel stretched on the grass and put his hands behind his head. “Ah, I shoulda known better than to run. It's like playing with my uncle's sheepdog: you run, it's gonna chase you.”

Johnny raised his head and propped his chin on Daniel's chest. He blinked. “Did you just compare me to a sheepdog?”

“No... no, that doesn't sound like something I'd do.”

He rolled his eyes and went to grab the blanket. Even if Daniel didn't know this was a picnic, they were still having it. Johnny had two different types of nuts to eat, after all.

They found a secluded corner of the castle where it seemed unlikely for anyone to accidentally stumble upon them, and then Johnny

spread the blanket out on the ground.

He sat down and, before Daniel could do anything more than crawl a couple predatory inches towards him, pulled the other boy in to sit against his chest. A restraining maneuver masquerading as a cuddle; Johnny could be clever too.

Daniel kicked his legs out and settled in, apparently content, so – okay.

“These peanuts are like, really old,” said Daniel, chewing. He dug into the bag and ate a few more.

“The cashews might be too, but I don't really know what a good cashew is supposed to taste like.”

“Swap?”

They swapped.

Johnny watched the clouds passing overhead. Castle with a sunroof, that was better than a normal castle any day, he thought.

It was easier, during, if he didn't try to think about it directly. Didn't look at it head-on. Like it was an optical illusion, and if he just relaxed about it, thought of nothing, something would unlock and then he'd see the other angle. The shape of something both true and false.

At the moment, he could feel along the edges of it in his mind, whatever it was. It felt big; too big maybe. It made him a little nervous.

“...and I hope you don't think I'm being presumptuous,” Daniel was saying; he'd squirmed around in Johnny's arms and it was all over after that. Now he was straddling his lap and had both their dicks out. He produced a small bottle of lotion he'd apparently bought in the gas station. “But I think you'll find this will substantially improve an already fantastic situation. Life just keeps getting better, doesn't it, Johnny?”

He was starting to think he was being manipulated. Like, the talking thing was a deliberate act, a choice the other boy made to force him to kiss him more, because if he was kissing him, Daniel's word output

dropped by at least eighty percent.

Daniel got a hand around both of them, and then Johnny had nothing to do but hold on and work on that percent.

Ha Ha Tonka to Eureka

The sun was at their back as Johnny drove to make up for the detour. They met up with Route 66 at Arlington after a series of turns and connections that would drive Daniel absolutely crazy if he was paying attention, but he wasn't paying attention, because he was asleep.

It was a little weird – feeling, that was. Weird-feeling. Because he was buckled in and asleep and technically the furthest he'd been from Johnny all day. It was almost like Johnny was alone in the car again.

Almost.

Daniel shifted his head and it nodded away from the seat, almost waking him. But he settled, face turned towards Johnny; thick lashes trembling as his eyes moved beneath their lids; mouth soft. His legs were sprawled out, and if he was Daniel, maybe he'd take that as some kind of invitation, but he's not Daniel, so Johnny reached over and took his hand instead.

Just for a few minutes. He'd let go the moment he thought Daniel was going to wake up.

It was darker on the road than the sky would have it, what with all the trees, and Johnny switched on his headlights. He counted the passing yellow dashes and looked at the twisting branches outlined against the darkening sky. He thought about how many miles it was to Chicago.

He was tired of wondering about the future like it was something he couldn't do anything about.

Who said the road had to end?

If he wasn't going back to California, and he probably wasn't, why couldn't he just keep driving east with Daniel? Daniel would probably be for it – why ride in a smelly cramped bus with a bunch of strangers when he could be trying to drive Johnny to distraction in the Avanti. And once they got to New Jersey, Johnny could, he could get a job or whatever, and he could be a whole new person, have a whole new life. And maybe someday when the Dodgers are in the World Series, Johnny will be watching the game in a bar somewhere and he'll tell the person he's with *you know, I'm from there originally.* And it'll be okay when he says it. It won't hurt.

Chicago didn't have to be the end of anything; it could be just another stop along the way. Who stopped halfway across the country, anyway? If all those people had stopped halfway on the Oregon Trail, sure maybe they wouldn't have had to ford a million rivers or shoot a million bears or get dysentery and die, but then they wouldn't have got to Oregon. And sure, who wanted to go to Oregon anyway, but that wasn't the point.

Daniel twitched and slid down the seat a little, and Johnny took his hand away. He was a ten and two by the time the other boy cracked his eyes open and looked around.

He stretched and yawned. “We stopping for dinner sometime soon?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “Figure St. Louis?”

Daniel nodded. “Barbecue, let's do it.”

And then he reached over and grabbed Johnny's hand.

Eureka to Saint Louis

In St. Louis, they drive around the downtown area for a while until they find a place advertising barbecue that's open. They get a couple orders of ribs slathered with a hot, vinegary sauce, along with few cups of collards greens (“never had 'em, but we should probably eat a vegetable at some point, right?” said Daniel); some cheese grits for Johnny (“poor-er man's polenta, don't say I didn't warn you”) and some macaroni and cheese for Daniel (“I love macaroni and cheese, I could – and have – lived off this stuff, like this the best food ever invented, I can't believe I've gone so long without it, to be honest—” and it continued from there, but Johnny wasn't listening anymore).

They take the food down to eat by the river and end up beneath the Gateway Arch; it's kind of hard to avoid it, standing on the side of the river like a bowlegged gunfighter facing off against the combined force of the downtown business district.

“Think we can go up to the top?” Daniel wondered, head craned to take in the twisting metal.

“It's after eight – probably closed,” said Johnny. He found a wide, flat concrete bench and spread the food out. He shoved a rib in his mouth and looked up as well, taking in the strange way the arch caught the ground beams and the lights from the downtown.

“It's supposed to be the Gateway to the West, right? Like, that's its thing.”

Daniel settled cross-legged on the bench across from him and reached for his precious cup of macaroni and cheese. “Yep.”

“But a gate works both ways, doesn't it?” said Johnny, spinning his plastic fork restlessly through his fingers. “I mean, if it's a gate to the west, it can be a gate to the east too. If you're going the other way.”

Daniel shrugged, looking nonplussed. “Yeah, I guess.” He looked up at it again, while Johnny looked at him. “Man, I wanted to go the top.”

“We can do the Sears Tower in Chicago. It's taller.”

“Yeah, I guess. But then you don't get to ride in the little bunker chamber.”

Johnny paused in his chewing and squinted at him. “Bunker chamber?”

“Yeah, they put you in these little space-age capsules to ride to the top, it's pretty cool.”

“Why does it sound like you've already been up there?”

Daniel shrugged. “My ma and me hit it on our way to the valley last year.” He put his hands up so suddenly, a piece of macaroni detached and went flying behind him into the darkness. “Okay, you got me. I wanted to kiss at the top of the arch. What can I say, I'm a romantic.”

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck and sighed and reached for another rib.

Saint Louis to Cahokia

Daniel suggested they find a Walmart parking lot to sleep in for the night, but Johnny didn't like the idea of being so close to people, of parking in an empty space and waking up surrounded by other cars. Anyone able to look in and see them. So they take the Eads Bridge across the Mississippi and suddenly they were finally in Illinois.

Daniel poured over the map with the flashlight as Johnny let the Interstate put the lights of St. Louis into the distance behind them. They should've put the top up for the drive; the temperature was dropping. But the stars were coming out too.

“Alright,” said Daniel eventually, clicking the flashlight off. “There's some kind of state park grounds or something up ahead. Should be able to park off to the side somewhere and be fine. Take the exit for 111, if there are signs for some place called Cahokia, follow them.”

“Roger that,” said Johnny, and then Daniel was keeling over sideways, fitting his head on Johnny's thigh. “Uh.” He glanced down. “Not helping look, I take it.”

Daniel yawned and shut his eyes. “I have fulfilled my navigational duties. I leave the rest up to the pilot. I trust him.” And when Johnny had nothing to say to that, Daniel reached up and stole his hand from where it was lying unused along the back of the seats. He tucked it against his chest, palm to heart.

“Okay,” said Johnny to the road.

He followed the brown signs for Cahokia and it did seem to be a whole lot of nothing. He finally parked along a dirt road with no streetlights, no buildings; just empty fields and hills of grass on either side. The park didn't even have an office, from what he could tell. But no office meant no entry fee, no one bugging them about sleeping there.

He cut the engine and slid out from beneath Daniel, ignoring his faint noise of complaint. He spent a couple minutes putting the top up and repositioning things from the trunk to the front seat, put the back seat down again. Then he opened the passenger door and thumped Daniel's

calf.

“Okay, up. Let's go. Back seat.”

Daniel raised his head and squinted down the length of his body at him. “Don't we have to put the seat down and all that?”

“Already did. C'mon.”

“So industrious, what's up with that all of a sudden? Give a guy a few orgasms,” and here Daniel tipped himself over into the back, “and suddenly he's keeping the place tidy for you, making the bed even. I feel like I've unlocked the secret to all human relationships, and the secret is sex.” A pause. “Okay, put that way, it doesn't sound like such a brilliant discovery, but still.”

Johnny pressed his forehead very, very briefly against the top of the Avanti outside, and then he got over himself and climbed in after him.

Daniel tried grabbing his dick three times before Johnny gave up and rolled over to curl around him, arms pinning Daniel's to his own chest. But then he wiggled his ass back against Johnny's dick, and good fucking christ.

“Quit it,” said Johnny, slinging a restraining leg over him. He tucked his face into his hair and mumbled, “I'm tired.”

Daniel sighed gustily. “Yeah, okay. Me too, I guess.”

They were quiet for a while, drifting towards sleep, hopefully. Which is maybe why Johnny felt like he could say, while Daniel was secure in his arms:

“I didn't think about you before all this, you know. I mean, I wasn't. It's not like I had this whole—”

“It's okay,” he said quickly, “I get it. I know. Me too.”

“Right.”

“I mean, I actually had a girlfriend until pretty recently. Kumiko, remember her?”

Johnny huffed a slight laugh against the back of his neck. “You went

on about her dancing for the better part of twenty minutes, yeah, I remember her."

"Right, well – she was actually going to come back with me to California, maybe try to make it dancing some place in L.A. but – y'know, she got an offer in Tokyo, and I guess it seemed like a better fit. Sometimes people just have to move forward, I get that. It's important. You know?"

Johnny shrugged; if Daniel didn't remember he was talking to someone who very obviously and very physically demonstrated an inability to move forward from a break-up, he wasn't about to remind him. Talking about beating him up seemed like a bad way to try to broach the subject of going east. Talk about wrong foot forward. Literally.

His arm tightened around Daniel a little and he tried again. "I just meant, I don't really know what this is, but – I'm glad. I mean, uh. Thank you."

And maybe *thank you* wasn't quite what he'd intended, maybe that was a weird thing to say, because suddenly Daniel exploded in gales of laughter, his body shaking against Johnny's chest.

"Oh, you are *most welcome*," he declared, between breathless laughs. "It was my pleasure, good sir. Literally."

Johnny figured he should probably just shut up for the night, try again tomorrow. When he leaned around to kiss Daniel, the other boy's lingering laughter was ticklish against his face.

Woodhenge III

There was a mouth on his. It delivered a kiss and went away and then kissed again, soft pressure, coaxing.

“Wake up,” wheedled the insanely annoying voice. Another kiss. “It's time for all would-be karate champions to wake up and do some kata.”

Johnny curled in tighter and threw a hand over his face, like he could block the incoming strikes. But Daniel just kissed his elbow.

“Was two-time All Valley,” Johnny said, voice gritty with sleep. “That's one more than you. *Would-be*.”

“There's that fighting spirit. Wake up and embrace it. C'mon.”

Daniel lifted his unresistant arm and dropped another kiss on his face, and Johnny woke up.

It turned out they were parked beside a large circle of tall wooden posts, which Johnny hadn't been able to see the previous night. They leaned against the Avanti as they brushed their teeth and looked at it.

“What do you think, some kind of construction thing? Ground's disturbed, it's recent,” said Daniel.

“Yeah, I don't know. Maybe it's part of the park, or whatever this place is.”

They go check it out after rinsing their mouths. Once inside the circle, it felt a lot less likely to be highway project. Something about the perfection of the circle, the placement of the posts. In the middle of nowhere like they were, it felt strange and old.

“Sun dial?” guessed Johnny, turning in place to look out at the outside arc.

“Only need one for that. Maybe it's an Indian calendar. I mean, we are right next to the Cahokia mounds.”

By mutual unspoken agreement, they fell into place to do the kata, but

then Daniel startled forward out of his ready stance, hand going to his pocket.

“Hold up. Here,” he said, and there was a scrap of fabric in his hand that made something in him go still. “Bend down a moment, will you. Been driving me crazy every time we do this. You beach bum hippie.”

Johnny obliged and Daniel tied it around his forehead. The fabric was wrong, slick polyester, but the tightness felt right.

“Yeah, it's to hold your brains in,” said Daniel, and Johnny realized he said the last part aloud.

He reached behind his head to grab the ends of the fabric and look at it; it was a souvenir Route 66 tie, all black with the highway marker in white at the end.

“Am I a genius, or am I genius?” said Daniel, backing up and surveying him with satisfaction. “Look at you, back to looking like a regular karate guy.”

Johnny fingered the end of the tie and said, “I don't look like a regular karate guy, I look like some business asshole who had too much to drink at a office party.”

And Daniel was unperturbed, which Johnny figured meant he was absolutely right.

They fell into ready stance at the center of the circle, and Johnny felt like he could see for miles.

Cahokia

Before driving out they decided to walk around a while, figure out what the deal was with the place. There were no buildings around, no real parking lot even, and the disconnect between a place being named and a place not seeming to be a place was a mystery neither of them could ignore.

They walked down the main road towards the tallest hill, which started to look less like a hill and more like something man-made the longer Johnny looked at it. It had steps leading to the top, and at the bottom a wooden plaque, which Daniel read aloud like he forgot Johnny wasn't driving and was perfectly capable of reading it himself.

“The Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site features the remains of the most sophisticated prehistoric native settlement north of Mexico. In 1250 AD – hey, not exactly prehistoric, *what* – this Mississippian city was larger than London, with a population of up to 20,000 people. Mound 38 before you, also called Monks Mound for the Trappist Monks who lived nearby and gardened on its first terrace, is the largest earthen mound on the North American continent and was likely the ceremonial center of Cahokia – how tall do you think this is?” he asked, looking up.

“I don't know,” said Johnny, “maybe like, ten stories? Hard to say with nothing around to compare it to.”

“We going up?”

Johnny cuffed him around the neck and then sort of left his arm there. “Of course we're going up.”

They started up the steps, and it was an unspoken thing, but Johnny got a couple steps ahead before Daniel skipped over a few to pass him and then before they knew it, they were racing up the mound.

Johnny won, because of course he did; look at him, and then look at Daniel.

He put his hands on his hips and watched, shaking his head a little, as Daniel made the final slog up to the top. “No way you thought you were going to win that, but you just couldn't help yourself, could you?”

“Shut up,” said Daniel, flopping down. He was breathing hard, and obviously trying to control it.

Johnny grinned a little and sat beside him. They looked out over the area; the excavated parts of the site were more obvious from above, and a vague sense of the city could be glimpsed. But only its footprint. In the distance they could see St. Louis, and Johnny shifted a little and said:

“So it's not the Arch, but I think – I mean, we're looking out over the top of a city right now. Kinda.”

Daniel shook his head a little, blinking against the wind that blew strongly over the top of the mound. “What?”

Johnny reached over to turn his face, and then he kissed him.

It felt strange and unbelievable that he could just do it, for no reason, none other than wanting to. Even stranger that Daniel let him. He felt his mouth curve into a smile under his lips.

“I'm coming to New Jersey,” said Johnny when he broke the kiss. Daniel's smile grew a fraction and he shook his head again, not getting it. “I'll drive you. To Parsippany or wherever, I mean. Forget the Greyhound, forget Chicago. I, uh. I want to come too. I'm coming.”

And then Daniel's expression transformed like he'd hoped, his breath coming out in a slight laugh, eyes lighting up and then he was – getting up. Johnny tilted his head and watched him walk a couple feet away, his own smile still going strong, because jesus, Daniel was so dramatic sometimes.

He climbed to his feet and approached the other boy, saying, “Don't tell me I've finally figured out how to shut you up—”

Daniel turned around and flung his arms around his neck. Johnny caught him and took his kiss, and okay. Good.

Except something wasn't right. He sensed it after only a second or two, and it was confirmed when Daniel took his mouth away and said:

“Johnny, man, you can't run from your problems.”

“What,” he said. “I'm not?” But Daniel was still speaking over him:

“I mean – okay, you can, obviously you... did, but. But you can't run

forever. It's no good, not in the long run." And he reached up to take Johnny's face in his hands, looking into his eyes seriously, so seriously, and what was happening. "Johnny, you need to call your mom."

"I. I know," he said, hands tightening on his waist. And suddenly speaking kind of hurt his throat. "I'm going to. But I just, I thought, I already drove you this far, why not take you all the way?"

And it was probably a sign of how serious he was, that Daniel didn't smirk even a little bit at the phrasing.

"Look, that'd be nice – it'd be great, who am I kidding. I'd love it – of course I would," he said urgently, like he was worried Johnny was misunderstanding him, but he wasn't misunderstanding anything: Daniel was saying no. "But what happens when we get there?"

I could get a job, Johnny thought. He tried to verbalize it; failed.

Daniel shook his head, narrowing his eyes against the hard wind; that midwestern flatland wind that never stopped, just like him. "You'd be three thousand miles from home – with a car your stepdad might be reporting as stolen, for all you know. With none of your stuff, no money. It's – it's a daydream, Johnny. A nice one, but."

His hands fell away from the other boy. He looked down and then away across the vast empty stretch of Cahokia: this place that was once larger than London and now mostly existed in the imagination.

Suddenly he didn't understand why anyone was trying so hard to remember it. Why can't anyone let the past be the fucking past.

"Johnny," said Daniel, reaching for him again.

"No, I get it," he said, stepping back and then hovering awkwardly, because he hadn't meant to do that, it gave too much away. He squinted over at him. "I mean, you're right. Moving on, that's – it's what Route 66 is all about, right? What you said the other day." It felt like a year ago.

"I – I'm coming back to California, man," he said, sounding almost helpless; but only almost, because he was Daniel LaRusso and he was never, ever actually helpless. "I'm not saying this is the end. I told you, if things don't work out with your mom – I'll be there for you, I will. I meant that."

“Yeah,” said Johnny. He cleared his throat and looked around again. “Look – I'll meet you back at the car, okay. Gonna go. Take a piss.”

Daniel ran a hand back over his head, looking frustrated, but he let him turn and start back down the steps without another word.

Cahokia to Litchfield

Forty minutes passed in complete silence. A preview of what was to come.

Was it worse having him in the passenger seat, anxiously chewing his nails and saying nothing, than not having him at all? Actually, yeah. Kind of was.

Had there ever been a state as ugly as Illinois? Probably. Everywhere might look like this, after. Or maybe everywhere had looked like this the whole time, and he was just distracted, didn't notice.

Different types of open sky: some you look at and think, it goes on forever. Desert sky doesn't stop. Other places, Illinois, you look up and feel like the tiny figure in a snow globe that's sat on a shelf unshaken for months. No proof to it, but you know the sky is a lie and you are trapped. But even the knowledge is useless. Knowing doesn't change anything, it just makes you stop looking up.

And Illinois wasn't even a real place, it was – waiting. The physical experience of waiting. It had a blackhole sitting on its shoulder, sucking all the character and life from the rest of state. All the roads went to it, too, so there was no avoiding it. You got sucked in until it was too late and then you lost him, and then you were spat out again, and fuck, was he going to have to drive *back* through Illinois?

No. Maybe he'd go north, move to Canada. They had funny tasting bacon and he fucking hated hockey, but there had to be some kind of upside to the place.

But no, he couldn't do that either. What a fake idea.

All his ideas were fake.

He could drive another thousand miles and it wouldn't change anything.

Two guys in a car is a road trip. One guy is a bottle of caffeine pills and a radio station that never gets turned. The miles between places were just math, and there was nothing to look forward to because it was all the same anyway. And silence: this silence. But without him looking at you. Will it be easier not having him in the passenger seat, looking at you? Actually, yeah.

Was it because they were both boys? He was pretty sure in all the stories, the girl never turns to the guy and says *you need to be realistic*.

Couple thousand miles of being forced to listen to country music on the radio, and all the Johnnys in country songs got the girl. They also usually got drunk; in fact, he really felt a kinship for the Johnnys in country songs, they seemed a lot like him. Except they got the girl, and he got an empty passenger seat.

So what was going to happen was, they were going to get to Chicago.

And then: the end.

And it would be better if that was how it worked, and someone could just slap up a sentence or two summing up what happened to him afterwards like they did at the end of those Based On A True Story movies. Better than actually living through it. And he'd actually kinda like to know; he'd like to read that Johnny Lawrence went on become a fireman and got married and had three kids, and actually he goes by John now, only his mom still calls him Johnny, because when you've called someone something their entire lives it forms a habit that's hard to break, you couldn't just wake up one day and change how you feel, that's not how the world worked, or people, or moms.

Yeah. Why couldn't he just wait for the postscript.

Litchfield to Waggoner

They were not even on Route 66 anymore, was the thing. Route 66 splintered apart in Illinois, pieces of old alignments visible from the occasional half-hearted sign, but the road itself was gone. It was all over before they even got a chance to realize it.

Waggoner to Farmersville

In Farmersville, he goes through the drive-thru of a McDonald's, because his life might be sort of ending, but they haven't had breakfast yet and he could hear Daniel's stomach making noises.

They ate in the parking lot, looking out at a field of stubbled corn stalks. He chewed through his egg muffin, not really tasting it, and wondered what it was like growing up to be a farmer from Farmersville. Seemed like it would feel a little confining. But who was he to judge.

After balling up his bag and dropping it in the foot well, Daniel shifted up on his knees on the seat and kissed his cheek.

Johnny blinked at him and he said with a slight smile, “See a McDonald's, get a kiss, remember?” And when Johnny only looked back down at his lap, Daniel sighed and wrapped his arms around his head like he could squeeze all the bad thoughts from it.

“Please don't be sad all the way to Chicago,” he said into his hair.

Johnny pushed at him, but not with much effort. “Stop.”

“Stop, what?” he said, knees nudging his thigh. “Trying to make you feel better?”

“I'm not going to feel better,” he said, and he could feel his ears burn a little at how that sounded: childish. Like he was being silly, feeling this way. Fuck Daniel.

“Think about it this way, okay,” he said, sitting back on his heels and dropping hands to Johnny's shoulders, “when I come back to California, I'll scrape together the dough to fly, and you can pick me up at the airport. We'll do the running at each other reunion kiss thing. If you're lucky, I may even let you dip me.”

“In *public*?”

Daniel flicked his ear. “Yeah, in public.”

“It's like you don't even exist in the same world as the rest of us,” he said, and if it came out a little resentful, it was only because for a while, he thought he would get to live in Daniel's bizarro world with him.

Daniel groaned and hugged him again. “Johnny, *please*.”

“I don't know what you want from me right now,” he said into his elbow.

“I want you to be okay.”

“Tough.” And this made Daniel laugh a little, which unfortunately made Johnny want to smile, but smiling when he felt like this was like the sun shining during a rain shower. Which, okay, it was kind of cool when that happened, but that didn't make it any less confusing.

“I want to show you a good time in Chicago,” said Daniel. “I don't want to get on a bus without seeing you smile again.”

“You say shit like that, and you expect me to be okay?” He couldn't stand this kid.

“I know you're going to be okay,” he said, like confidence was something he could pass along like Mono. Johnny shook his head. “Hey? Hey.” Daniel bumped his cheek with his nose and followed it up with a kiss. “Hey.”

“Shut up,” he said, but he turned his head and kissed him.

He shut his eyes and tried not to wonder how many he had left before Daniel was gone. The idea that there would be a last one, and he was going to have to live through it and past it and look back on it made him want to both never kiss Daniel again and never stop kissing him.

“Whoa. Fags?” said someone, walking past the car towards the McDonald's.

Johnny broke the kiss. “*See*?” he demanded, pushing him back.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “We're in central Illinois, Johnny. They probably say that if they see a guy with combed hair.”

But he didn't argue when Johnny insisted on getting back on the road immediately.

Farmersville to Pontiac

“What did you mean,” said Johnny eventually, because listening to Daniel talk had to be better than sitting with his own miserable thoughts, “'show me a good time in Chicago'?”

He glanced over to see Daniel's slow grin. “Well – obviously we're going to hit the Sears Tower, maybe catch a White Sox game—”

“White Sox? Why would we see a Sox game, why not a Cubs game?”

“I mean, we could see a Cubs game, that's fine,” he said, nonplussed. “I'm more used to watching the Sox is all, because they play the Yankees more often.”

Johnny's foot actually slipped off the pedal a moment. He stared over at him. “The Yankees? You're a – you're a *Yankees fan*?”

Daniel shrugged. “Everyone is, back home. What's the – oh, seriously?” because Johnny turned his head and gagged a little.

“I can't believe we've driven like, 1,500 miles and I'm only just finding out you're a Yankees fan. I would've left you on the side of the road at Victorsville if I knew that.” It was so pathetic how untrue the statement was, but he felt better for uttering it.

“Oh, really?”

He nodded decisively. “Yeah.”

“You know, this Yankees fan blew your mind yesterday.”

“Don't remind me. I can't believe I kissed a Yankees fan.”

“This Yankees fan was thinking about blowing your mind again, maybe while you were driving—”

Johnny's hands tightened around the steering wheel. “That's Avanti endangerment.”

If Daniel tried to touch him while he was driving, he was definitely leaving him on the side of the road in the middle of Illinois, and it was also pathetic how untrue *that* statement was.

Daniel leaned far over the seat so he could catch Johnny's gaze. He

looked a little wide-eyed, a little crazy, actually. “Are you seriously saying you would turn down road head... because of your car? Not even like, our lives, or getting caught by cops or something. The car.”

“How are you surprised at this point?” Johnny asked; those other things hadn't even occurred to him.

“We should try some deep dish pizza while we're there,” said Johnny.

“You think we're stepping within one hundred yards of an Italian restaurant in Chicago, you're fooling yourself. You kidding me? You can't trust Chicago Italians. Deep dish,” said in a tone of deep disgust. “Case in point. Crime against humanity. What happened to them? What were they thinking?”

“Have you ever even tried deep dish? I never have.”

“And you never will, not so long as I'm around,” and then Daniel winced and they both said nothing for a while.

“That's kind of a lot of stuff,” said Johnny. “How exactly do you plan to do all that before – catching the bus?” And he told himself the pause was barely noticeable.

“Oh, we're getting a hotel room,” said Daniel, tapping his pen against his lip as he looked down at the list.

“We're getting a hotel room, he says. Right. Just like that. Okay.”

Daniel reached a hand out absently and squeezed his thigh.

And it's not that he thought sleeping in the Avanti was the most comfortable way to live or anything. It's only – it's only he hadn't realized the night before was the last time he'd do it with Daniel.

And just like that, he couldn't look at him, and his throat was tight again. He put his elbow out the window and rubbed his temple, scratched his cheek.

After a moment, he dropped his other hand to cover Daniel's on his leg.

Pontiac to Cicero

It came on like all major cities – and yeah, Johnny's been to *several*, and the Daniel in his head can shut up – fields and woods and empty space that wasn't actually empty gradually replaced by layers of roads, blocked off and micromanaged into development and subdevelopment. You sort of looked around and realized while you weren't in the city yet, you were definitely no longer in the country.

Even the gas stations were somehow different, because the entire street was not built around them, catering to people just trying to breeze on through. They were just another business squeezed in next to the road.

Johnny stopped so Daniel could go inside and buy a proper map of the city. He put a little gas in the tank and stood looking back over the freeway.

The meaning of a mile changed. Geography shrunk one way but expanded another. It was unbelievable how long a mile took to travel; it was unbelievable how much could fit into a mile.

Driving into some place like Los Angeles, or San Francisco, any city like this, and it was possible to almost forget the sheer enormity of open space and solitude that existed elsewhere in the country. Disbelief chased the memory and made it a dream.

But *this* was real, said the spreading expanse of gray concrete: the widening, multiplying lanes of traffic, the overpasses and underpasses and rising barrier walls blocking unlucky houses from the sound of the freeway.

This was real, said the countless blocks of homes and apartments, warehouses and office buildings, strip malls lining the roads, none of it looking like something someone would design or choose, and yet there it all was.

This was real, said the thousands of other cars streaming in all directions: people on their way to work, the doctor's, out shopping, running away or returning home.

Chicago was very much real.

Cicero to N Wabash Ave & E Erie St

“That's a one-way.”

“I can see that.”

“Just wanted to make sure. Don't want to turn into traffic again. Oh, are we going across the river again? We're going across the river again. You sure like bridges.”

“Can you maybe direct me before we end up on Lake Shore Drive?”

“You say it like it's inevitable. Every street's a new choice, Johnny, you don't gotta end up on Lake Shore Drive if you don't want to.”

“That's a lie, every street's not a choice, every street's – oh, fuck off!” shouted out his window at a tan Chevy Cav that just turned in front of him. “Every street's not a choice, Daniel, because every street is apparently *a fucking one-way*.”

He turned and then somehow they were going across the river again.

“Look at you,” said Daniel, sitting coolly with an ankle balanced on his knee, holding his useless map up like some kind of 1950s husband with his morning paper. He shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Valley kid can't handle the big city traffic, huh. This is the real deal, no more easy freeway jockeying, every thing simple and only thing that matters is brute speed. You gotta have cunning in the big city. You gotta be agile.”

“You,” said Johnny, “are from *Newark*. You probably took *public transportation*.”

Daniel huffed and raised his map.

Daniel pointed. “Look, there – parking, let's just park and take a breath, figure out where we're gonna stay.”

“Did you see how much they were asking? No way. We can find

cheaper.”

Daniel look unconvinced.

“I can't believe there's nothing cheaper,” said Johnny after cutting the engine. He looked down in numb disbelief at the little ticket in his hand. “Never mind a hotel room, we just bought a hotel room for the Avanti. We can sleep on the lake shore or something.”

“I have always wanted to have sex on a beach,” said Daniel thoughtfully. “But I wasn't thinking Lake Michigan. Somehow doesn't sound as nice.”

The Magnificent Mile

“Is Navy Pier on your list?” asked Johnny, trailing after him down the sidewalk. He looked away from the wayfinding sign. “Are we going to ride the Ferris Wheel?”

“What are we, tourists?” called Daniel over his shoulder.

He thought about it. “Yes?”

Daniel walked faster in Chicago. The sidewalks were twice as wide as the ones Johnny was used to, but somehow still clogged with people, and it was like Daniel got some thrill finding the gaps between passing bodies and slipping through them. Then he'd remember he wasn't alone and hit the outside of the crowd and wait for Johnny to catch up. He was beginning to think he should shove him in one of those leash backpacks they made for annoying kids.

They walked up and down Michigan Avenue for a while, taking in the tall buildings and getting their bearings. Well; Johnny got their bearings by studying the map while Daniel admired all the ritzy people and shops.

“How much do you think a suit from there costs?” he'd ask.

“I don't know, how much was that funny one you wore to prom?”

Or:

“Wow, check out that car,” he'd say.

“The Avanti's better.” Even missing a hubcap.

Eventually Johnny figured he had it worked out; he knew where they were going to stay. He grabbed the other boy's arm to tug him along.

“Well, what do you think?”

Daniel dragged his eyes away from the massive arched windows. “Cool building, yeah.”

“I mean, about staying here,” he said impatiently.

His eyebrows shot up. “We're not staying here.”

“Not if you don't like it, I guess. Why don't you like it? What's wrong with it.” He looked at the awning, the bit of the lobby he could see through the glass doors.

“Johnny, it's the Drake Hotel.” He paused significantly after this and widened his eyes; Johnny stared back. “...And by that I mean, it's too expensive.”

“It's only three stars,” he said.

“Oh, wow.” Daniel laughed and turned in place, so dramatic. He even clapped his hands and looked up at the sky. “Wow, okay. How did I forget about this. You ride in a car with a guy's single pair of jeans for a week, and you forget he's used to money. Where do you usually stay when you go places in California, Johnny? You booking rooms at the Ritz-Carlton?”

And the answer was yes, but he sensed this was also the wrong answer, so he just narrowed his eyes and stayed silent.

Daniel licked his lip and shook his head, still looking amused. “Well, hate to break it to you, but you can't just walk into a place like that, looking like we do, and slap down a few twenties. Even I know that.”

“Why can't I? It's money, isn't it.” He scowled up at the building, which was suddenly giving him a lot more trouble than he'd expected. He should've gone for the Westin.

Daniel pulled at his wrist and started them headed back down the street. “Look, what's the big deal? We'll do this my way. There's gotta be a million places we can get a room in, and then you won't blow whatever remains of your cash on it.”

“Maybe I wanted it to be, like.” God, he felt stupid. Daniel made him so stupid. “Nice.” And, as his cheeks heated, he rushed on to say, “I mean, since you complained so much about sleeping in the Avanti and all, and the *one* time we got a hotel you couldn't enjoy it, I guess, because you were overreacting about a stupid small cut on my head.”

Instead of laughing, Daniel only turned and walked backwards for a few feet in front of him, trusting the stream of other pedestrians to make way. A strange smile pulled at his face as he watched Johnny.

“What?” he said flatly.

“Boy, you got it *bad*,” said Daniel quietly. He plucked at the collar of his T-shirt. “You got it bad for this.” And yeah, he sounded a little teasing, but the tone itself felt somehow like a kiss. Right there in public and everything.

Johnny shoved his hands in his pockets. “I'm not pushing you into traffic right now, so – guess so.”

After another couple seconds, he had to reach out to stop him from bumping into some moron who also wasn't looking where they were going, and Daniel resumed walking the right way. He fell in at Johnny's side and this time, he stuck close.

“Okay, rich kid,” he said, “you ever stay in a hostel?”

Red Line: Michigan & Delaware to State & Van Buren

Johnny was extremely skeptical as they stepped on. The car was half full: a scattering of people sitting alone, a couple standing close sharing a pole; an old man pushing a short wire cart full of seeming garbage stationed near the other door.

Daniel pushed him to move along, and he walked over to one of the nearby free rows. The train started and he took an unsteady step forward, catching himself on the back of a seat. He hurriedly shuffled in to sit against the window.

“So far this is *great*,” he muttered to Daniel. “Graffiti, hard cramped little seats. Constant paranoia that we're going to miss our stop. What's not to love.”

“Well, I mean – that's pretty cool,” he said, pointing forward out the window to where they were rocketing between buildings above the street. “Also, there are things we can do on the el that we couldn't in the Avanti.”

Johnny's eyes went wide. “You're insane.”

Daniel shut his eyes. “Oh my god, not that. Jesus, Johnny.” He shifted over so they were pressed up close, thigh to thigh, and took Johnny's arm, hugging it to his chest. “I meant this, you moron. Rule of all trains: you mind your own business.”

Johnny glanced around quickly, but he realized it was true, that none of the other occupants of the train car were paying any attention. Miraculously, no one gave a shit about what two guys were doing or not doing in some seat in the back. He slowly started to relax.

After a moment, he slouched down a little and tugged his arm free so he could wrap it around Daniel's shoulders. His heart pounded as he did it, and *no one cared.*

Daniel put his head against his chest, and together they watched the city rattle by, a skyscraper giving way to another, and another.

24 Congress Pkwy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The front room of the youth hostel was bright and sunny, its walls plastered with posters for nearby events, postcards from past visitors, photos of smiling guests and staff. It all had a very a loose, casual feeling, like they'd dropped in to crash on the couch of a friend-of-a-friend, and Johnny felt a little skeptical of that too.

Daniel did most of the talking; in the space of a minute, he gave the smiling girl behind the desk a rundown of their trip since California, minus all the sex but including such hits as them running out of gas next to a ghost town (“and we had no water at all, like none, and it was about a hundred degrees”); getting into a drag race in New Mexico (“Johnny lost”); Johnny's head wound from the bar fight (“turn around, man, show her the scab”); getting into a drag race again in Missouri (“I won”); and seeing a castle (at which point they both sort of went red).

“Sounds like quite the trip. So are you going to go see the sign?” she asked.

“What sign?” they asked, voices overlapping.

“Oh, there's an old sign for Route 66 somewhere around here. Adams, I think? The Chicago Loop was the original eastern terminus.”

“Oh, well – then, yeah,” said Daniel, casting a look up at Johnny. “We'll have to check that out, thanks.”

She lifted her clipboard and got down to business. “So we have beds available in the men's dorm; it's about half-full right now, five other guys are staying in there. There's also the co-ed dorm, which has a little more space – we have a group staying from Denmark, they seem super fun. Our private king room ensuite is booked, but there's also a private double suite and a private single ensuite—”

“Ensuite means, what?” said Johnny.

“It has its own bathroom – part of the hostel charm,” she added sunnily, “communal showers. It's just like being back in gym class again, except. Not gross?”

“We'll take the single ensuite,” said Daniel, and Johnny rubbed the back of his neck real quick and directed his gaze out the window.

“Sure thing,” she said, not missing a beat. She'd probably seen it all, Johnny thought with desperate hope. Like – people from Denmark. Two guys splitting a room had nothing on that.

They passed a few people heading down the hallway on the third floor and exchanged nods all around. Johnny was carrying the sheets and pillows for the bed and trying to hide his face behind the stack while Daniel whistled and flipped the room key around his finger. Had there ever been a guy so insufferably smug? Johnny was beginning to feel a little like the cheerleader who got banged by the quarterback and paraded on his arm around school afterwards.

Daniel inserted the key and jiggled it, opening the door.

The room was small, clean, and pretty bare; it had a full-size mattress up against the large window overlooking Congress on the far wall and two chairs around a tiny circular table in the other corner. The floor was wood, mostly covered in a worn rope rug, which cushioned Daniel's backpack as he dropped it with great finality.

Daniel reached past him to shut the door. He took the bedding from Johnny's arms and carefully set it on the table.

Then he grinned and jumped at him, riding him down to the bed with a delighted laugh.

Chapter End Notes

> historical note: I'm a hack. Pretty sure this specific hostel in downtown chicago didn't open until the late 90s at the earliest, but look! I had to include it b/c my cheap ass stayed there when my brother got married (there's nothing quite like getting dressed to the nines while standing next to a goddamn bunk bed).

“Hey, do you wanna – ” to “Please cheer up.”

“Hey, do you wanna – ” said Daniel, pulling him toward the bathroom, and yeah, of course Johnny wanted to have sex in the shower. What a stupid question.

Daniel must've asked a thousand stupid questions on this trip. Stupid less in content than intent, because he rarely asked a question he expected Johnny to actually answer. Either because the answer was obvious (“Could you pick me up?”) or embarrassing (“Could you pick me up during sex?”) or some terrible combination of both (“Do you want to try that sometime?”) but yeah, generally Daniel didn't wait for answers, he felt them out himself. He asked questions like he was born blind and had only learned how to feel out the world through speech. A life built around Blind Man's Bluff.

And maybe all his reflexive wondering was how he was so okay with everything all the time. If he was wondering, he hadn't already decided to be disappointed.

Neat trick, Johnny wished he could learn it.

They went into the bathroom and sort of looked at each other. Daniel's hands went up to the back of his shirt and pulled and then he was standing in front of Johnny without a shirt again and, the thing about being in a room, rather than a car.

The thing about rooms.

It was that in cars.

Bodies were kinda negotiable. In cars, that was. The car had to be navigated around, dealt with – like, the space. There was structure to it. You weren't just two people standing in a room, you were two people trying to make something work in, in a car. The difficulty was part of the experience, and if something went wrong, well, car. But a room was just a room. And there was no reason, in a room, not to be —

“Never really been naked in front of somebody before,” said Daniel, and then he said *a lot* more, but yeah, that.

Or rather, not quite that, because Johnny had actually been naked in front of plenty of people, in locker rooms mostly. And he'd been down

to his boxers even on this trip. But it was different, doing it on purpose: to take a shower, together.

It was just different.

They stripped down, and it was sort of unbearably awkward , watching and being seen watching. Maybe it would've been better taking each other's clothes off? But that felt like another step entirely; the idea of reaching out and grabbing Daniel, yanking his shirt over his head or dragging his shorts down all the way, it was.

Well, that was.

Anyway, it was too late, dude was naked.

And then so was Johnny.

They stepped into the tub and then Daniel jumped *out* of the tub because they'd forgot the shampoo and soap in his bag in the other room, and Johnny didn't know if he should avert his eyes from the mad scramble that ensued, but he didn't and.

Well, he dragged the shower curtain around the tub and turned on the water. He put his head under the spray and blinked down at the drain.

“I can't believe you started without me,” said Daniel a second later, bursting back onto the scene with a loud jangle of curtain rings. “Where are your manners, Johnny?”

“It's not like we can both get wet at the same time,” he said, nonplussed.

Daniel set the shampoo and soap down on the edge of the tub and took possession of Johnny's arms. He stepped close, feet jockeying for space in the narrow tub, and turned Johnny so his back was against the tile wall and the water hitting his own face and neck and he said:

“The fun's in the trying, silly,” and he rose up to kiss him.

After a moment, Johnny dropped his hands to pull him close, fingers finding the divot of his spine and, and slipping down to palm his ass and Daniel seemed to really, really like that, surprised humming, so Johnny squeezed a little and kissed back like he could communicate better that way.

“Okay, okay,” said Daniel, taking his mouth away, and Johnny

watched his game percentage go down. “Let's get down to brass tacks. You know, people talk about shower sex and they always sort of downplay the shower part, but actually I've been thinking about this for a while, so here – you let me wash you, I'll take care of you, okay —”

For some reason this was what made him feel shy. Terrible. “Wouldn't it be quicker if we just washed ourselves, real quick, and then got on with things?”

But Daniel was already pouring shampoo into his hand and lathering it up. He shook his head. “That's not hot,” he said, this supreme voice of authority, “that's not romantic. What are you thinking – look, it's best you let me do the thinking here, okay, I've got all the good ideas. This isn't a shower in the locker room, Johnny.”

“Ball game's at 7, *Daniel*. If we want to do anything before that, we have to hustle.”

But at the other boy's foam-handed gesture, he obligingly ducked his head. The hand dug into his hair and he shivered a little. He suddenly felt too large for the tub.

“You sure you don't want to skip the sight-seeing and just have lots of sex for the rest of the day?” asked Daniel, and the thing about him was that he obviously thought of himself as this incredibly smart and sophisticated person, but he was actually just an idiot sex fiend.

(He didn't even want to ride a Ferris Wheel with Johnny. What was more romantic than a Ferris Wheel?)

Daniel washed his hair and then moved on to his soaping up his shoulders and chest. Johnny just stood there feeling a little overwhelmed and trying to hold on to his annoyance, but it was impossible, because Daniel was mostly hard. It did Johnny's head in that it was just from running his hands over him.

“You know, I don't mind that you're bigger than me?” And then he said a lot more but Johnny was thinking *but I'm not.*

Like, true, Daniel was smaller. Not actually small, but yeah, small, but also not really. But Johnny could cover him completely if need be. Like if they were standing in a bank someplace and there was suddenly a bank robber or something and bullets started flying, Johnny figured he could block him pretty good.

Daniel knelt down, soapy hands sliding down the back of Johnny's thighs, making his legs twitch, and he finally stopped talking because he was running his mouth up the length of Johnny's dick and then taking the head into his mouth.

His eyes fluttered shut, and Johnny threw out a hand, slapping the tile and bracing himself.

How exactly was he supposed to. It wasn't.

Fair.

Maybe if he begged? Daniel liked to hear him beg, so maybe if Johnny begged enough, he'd change his mind and he wouldn't get on that bus. Maybe if Johnny begged, he'd just stay here with him, and Johnny would let him do whatever he wanted to him. They wouldn't even have to ride the Ferris Wheel, or go to a Cubs game, or take the stupid train everywhere. Johnny would let him do whatever he wanted, and Daniel could just stay and it would always be – this—

Aloud, he said, " *Daniel* ," and wiped the hair back from his forehead.

Daniel turned his head and spat onto the bottom of the tub, and then he kissed Johnny's pelvic cut and looked up at him, all raked-back hair and dripping lashes and dark eyes and he said:

"You are the saddest boy ever to get his dick sucked in a shower. Please cheer up."

At the End of Route 66

They found the unassuming brown sign a mere five blocks away from the hostel; Daniel asked about twenty people in passing before someone was both local enough and patient enough to point them in the right direction.

And then they arrived at last to the end of Route 66.

“Okay,” said Johnny after about a second. “We saw it. Can we go now?”

“Can we go now,” repeated Daniel. “How about we pause and appreciate the journey?”

“I did. When I was on the journey. But we're not anymore, and this is just a stupid old sign.” He put his hands in his pockets and looked around the busy street. There. The traffic was more interesting, and he was not going to lose it standing on a sidewalk outside a fucking Rite-Aid.

“You got a bad attitude,” said Daniel, and then before Johnny can snap – something, anyway – back, he was saying, “hang on,” and jogging down the block to bother some guy who was trying to take a Polaroid looking north up Michigan Avenue. As Johnny watched, bemused, Daniel dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet and gestured at the camera in the guy's hands. After a moment, the guy shrugged and nodded and – *no. No, c'mon.*

“No,” said Johnny, when Daniel came back. “No, c'mon—”

“Yes,” said Daniel, shoving him in front of the street post with the sign.

“I don't do photos.”

“Today you do.”

The guy backed up a few feet, glancing behind him on the sidewalk to make sure he didn't run into anybody. Johnny stared grimly ahead and Daniel glanced up at him.

“Smile, Johnny. You'll wish you had later.” And he threw his arm around Johnny's shoulders like they were friends, or something.

He breathed out. He looked at the guy waiting with his bulky camera lifted up. He thought about Daniel squeezing the life out of his arm.

And Johnny made himself smile.

Shedd Aquarium

“What kind of fish would you be?” asked Daniel. He spoke quietly as they walked slowly along, like he was mindful of spooking the fish. In the bluish cast of the tanks, he finally looked a little like Johnny felt; older and a little solemn.

“A shark,” said Johnny, looking up at the arcing tank and a school of passing fish. “Great white.”

Daniel's mouth quirked as he glanced back at him. “Of course. Shoulda guessed.”

“If you have to be a fish, you might as well be like, *the* fish. Ask someone what kind of jungle animal they want to be, and no one's going to say a toucan.”

“I like toucans,” said Daniel mildly. “They're funny looking.”

“Your priorities have never exactly been geared to survival.” They walked along a little further. “Well? What about you? What kind of fish would you be?”

“A blue whale.”

And that wasn't, strictly speaking, a fish, but Johnny would allow it. Mostly because it was funny. Of course Daniel would pick the largest animal on the planet.

“You know,” he said, poking the back of his head. “They say size isn't everything.”

Daniel slapped his hand away but then it was like he changed his mind and snatched it out of the air a second later. He squeezed his fingers a moment before releasing them.

“It's not like that,” he said, looking over with a smile. “Whales sing to each other.”

Red Line: Roosevelt to Addison

It seemed like everyone else in the city had the same idea as them at the same time. It was the only possible explanation for how the train pulled up on the tracks and opened its doors to an already packed car. The sizable crowd waiting at the station started making its way onto the train anyway. Physics couldn't compare to the desire to get home from work, apparently.

“Guess we should wait for the next one,” said Johnny and Daniel made a slight negating noise.

“Uh, no. That's not how this works.” And then to his confusion and faint horror, Daniel pulled him into the nearest car. There was no room, but somehow he was pulling him into it.

They squeezed into the center of the car, both grabbing for one of the handles that were hanging down as the train pulled away. The crowd rocked a little, but there wasn't enough room for anyone to even fall down. Someone's bag was pressing into his shoulder, and a suitcase into his thigh. He could hear the headphone bleed of the guy next to him, Purple Rain, and the sound of half a dozen people breathing and shifting and sighing.

Daniel stood facing him, and after a moment he trod deliberately on Johnny's foot. Johnny looked up from the floor of the car and met his eyes. Daniel smiled a little: a private smile.

It felt too weird to talk with strangers standing inches away all around. So they didn't.

Daniel managed to make it feel like they were having a conversation anyway.

Terrace at Wrigley Field

The wind blowing over Wrigley Field was sometimes as hard as 17 miles per hour, according to the sports announcer. They were setting well out of it, so it was only trivia: an explanation to shout when a player they liked did poorly. Well, you know, this crazy wind...

The first few innings were slow-going for the home team, the Expos gaining a lead of three before the Cubs finally got on the board in the fourth inning.

Meanwhile, they ate a dinner of cheeseburgers and pretzels, a box of cracker jack for desert for Daniel and a beer for Johnny.

“You didn't get carded?” asked Daniel skeptically, eyeing the tall boy can clutched victoriously in Johnny's hand.

He sipped his beer and smacked his lips as obnoxiously as he could manage. “Guess I look too manly.”

The cracker jack prize was a small plastic pipe, probably meant for blowing bubbles, and Daniel wasted no time sticking it in the corner of his mouth. He held the end like it might issue out some smoke at any moment and frowned at the field. “I look plenty manly.”

The real action mostly went down in the fifth, with the Expos ruining all the home fans' nights by scoring twelve runs. They scored so many times, Andre Dawson got the chance to go up to the plate again and hit a home run for the second time in the inning.

“Holy shit,” said Johnny, standing to watch the ball.

“That a record?” wondered Daniel, reclining back with his feet on the seats in front of them, head turned to listen to the radio announcer rattle off excited commentary on the hit.

“Don't think so, but gotta be rare, right?” He sat back down. “That was so cool.”

“Two home runs in the same inning,” said Daniel, thoughtful and slow, and Johnny knew that voice. “Think it's some kind of sign, Johnny?”

“Sign for more beer,” he said, and drained the rest of his can. He felt better than he had since that morning, and he wanted to chase the

feeling for as long as he could.

Buckingham Fountain at Grant Park

Four tallboys and a train ride later, and he was sitting on the grass in a dark park, staring at the stacked golden lights of the biggest water fountain he'd ever seen. He sat with his arms looped loosely around his knees and his shoulder pressed against Daniel's, and he felt calm.

“You know, there's a chance it won't be the same,” he said to the fountain. “If – when you come back to California, I mean. After. It might not be the same.”

“What, because we're not on the road?” said Daniel. “Road's gotta end sometime. Even if you were coming to Jersey, that'd be true.”

“I know that. I just mean – people change, and there's no telling when or how it'll happen. It won't even be a choice, probably. This,” and somehow he could say it, maybe because of the dark, or the beer, or maybe because at this point there wasn't really any reason not to; he wasn't even trying to convince him, he just needed to say it. “This might be our only chance to feel this way. Exactly like this. Might never get another chance, and turning away from that feels stupid. And wrong.”

Daniel didn't say anything for a very long moment. When he next spoke, his voice sounded a little closer and somehow tired. “Yeah, maybe. I've had relationships end – I mean. All of them, I guess. Right? I'm not saying it's not a possibility, okay. I'm not an idiot.”

His voice scraped out of him. “Then why—”

“Mr. Miyagi once said to me, never put passion before principle, and I didn't quite understand what he meant. And it doesn't sound so great, at first, right? I mean, what's wrong with passion? That's the stuff of life.”

He shifted on the grass, bumping their knees. And maybe he was trying to catch his eye, but Johnny didn't look away from the fountain, which was due to start its final show of the night any moment now.

Daniel continued, “But this summer, I watched him stand up against his oldest friend, who was pushing him around, threatening his life – and I kind of got it. I mean, I looked at Chozen and Sato, and then I looked at him, and I got it. Because everything they did was driven by

fear, and even if he was going to fight in the end, he didn't want to make the choice just because he was scared. Because there's something – false in that."

Johnny's throat worked a moment. He asked with a passing attempt at humor, "Are you telling me fear doesn't belong in this dojo?"

"Uh, no." Daniel elbowed him lightly. "There's nothing wrong with being scared. You think I'm not?"

"I used to think you were scared all the time, whenever we fought last year. And then I wasn't so sure." Now he didn't think Daniel was scared of anything.

"We just." Daniel sighed and rubbed his face. He propped up his chin in his palm and stared ahead at the fountain. "We can't let fear guide our choices."

In front of them, across the walk and the pool of water, music began to play and the center fountain shot up a massive jet. Johnny tilted his head; it seemed about as tall as the mound at Cahokia.

"I'm scared to call my mom," said Johnny, eyes on the glowing water. "I'm fucking terrified, man."

And Daniel didn't try to tell him it was going to be alright, because how the hell did he know; he just quietly said, "I know."

Their Room, at Night

Daniel unlocked the door and shoved inside. Johnny caught his arm as he entered right after; at his questioning glance, he dragged him stumbling forward against his chest. He bent to sweep an arm around his legs and lifted him against the back of the door, pressing it closed.

Johnny kissed him briefly and then raised an eyebrow. “Well? It everything you thought it would be?”

Daniel adjusted his legs and gripped Johnny's biceps, and looked sort of down and around, a little wide-eyed. Johnny didn't think he'd ever seen this specific expression on his face before.

“...Damn.” Pink-faced, Daniel knocked his head back against the door and laughed a little. “Oh, damn. Well. That's me ruined for a while. Think I'm going to be dreaming about this. Christ, who, who knew. Just. The things you learn about yourself. Life's an ocean voyage of discovery, isn't it. Fuck, this is. Ah. Kinda incredible, actually, uh, what this is doing for me. Is it as good for you as it is for me – wish I could return the favor, really – oh fuck—”

Because Johnny had swung him away from the door.

They crossed the room to the bed. Daniel's legs tightened around his waist; his dick was already a hard, burning line against Johnny's stomach, and very distracting.

He paused and they both looked down.

Johnny said, unnecessarily, “We never put on the sheets.”

Daniel rubbed against him like he couldn't quite help it. He transferred his arms to around his neck and put his mouth to Johnny's ear and whispered, “Do you know what would be so, so hot?”

Johnny cleared his throat and tried not to shift on his feet.

“It would be *so fucking sexy* if you made the bed – hey!”

Because Johnny had tossed him on the bare mattress.

Daniel bounced once, still complaining. Johnny threw a pillow in his face.

They made the bed and brushed their teeth. Daniel brushed his left-handed, his right busy running meditatively up the length of Johnny's back beneath his shirt. Johnny folded one arm across his middle and balanced his other elbow on it, scrubbing vigorously and pretending he didn't notice the touch. He was very committed to dental hygiene.

Climbing into bed afterwards was weird. Like they were play-acting or something, except neither of them were doing a very good job in their roles.

Johnny shifted onto his back and looked out the window at the city night, the streetlights casting half the room in a dark orange light. Daniel turned to reach for him and he said, cheeks burning a little, “I – I'm not really.” Was he seriously saying this? What next, 'he had a headache'? Fucking Christ. “I don't really. Want to. Right now.”

“Okay,” said Daniel, and his voice sounded a little strange. “But um, can we still – can I?” And his hand landed on his arm, like he had to ask, and that fucked Johnny up a little.

He lifted his arm and pulled him close, and Daniel slipped in against him. He was half-hard against Johnny's hip, but he didn't try to do anything about it. There was a strange intimacy to that, it turned out.

Johnny shut his eyes.

“Not knocking the Avanti, but it's nice being able to stretch out,” murmured Daniel.

It was, but after so long sleeping curled up, he also felt a little exposed lying there on his back. “Yeah.”

“Do you think they'd let us do kata on the Skydeck tomorrow?”

Against his will, his mouth curled. “Probably not.”

“They say on a clear day, you can see three other states. Imagine doing karate over four states. We'd be like, karate gods.”

“Win one measly tournament and the guy thinks he's ready to be a karate god,” said Johnny.

“One tournament and a fight to the death, you mean. Don't forget that.”

“I still think you made it all up.” And when Daniel kneed him lightly in the thigh, he added, “I bet there was no fight in the castle, no typhoon. I bet you were dancing in some place and got into a stupid fight, because you always do—”

“*I* do?” he said in disbelief.

Johnny continued, “And then maybe you got in a lucky kick or something.”

“Lucky kick,” muttered Daniel against his chest. He pressed a kiss to it and said, “I'd kick your ass, but my karate is for defense only.”

Bullshit: you always strike first. He didn't say it; didn't say anything, in fact, and the conversation dropped away again.

How many hours before sunrise, before they had to get up and check-out? He didn't know, but he was resolved to stay awake for all of them. He was going to be a thief in the night.

First, he was going to memorize everything: focus on it in that way he could sometimes when he was in the zone. He'd create a copy of it in his brain, a perfect forgery.

Tomorrow night, when he was alone again, he would summon the sensations one-by-one: the sound of his breathing, the warm weight resting against his side, the smell of his hair – they used the same shampoo, but somehow it was different, and that was going to be tricky. But he'd assemble all these parts and somehow hold them together at the same time in the front his mind, and that way he'd have something of Daniel.

Something that, unlike the real thing, could truly be his.

Their Room, at Day

He really did start to stir and wake up right after dawn, this absolute freak.

Johnny watched his fingers twitch and dig in a little on the pillow next to his head. He thought about the usual time he was woken up every day that past week, and all the hours of Daniel that must've passed in the dark mystery of the mornings.

Daniel shifted and turned around on the bed. He blinked when he noticed Johnny was already awake, and Johnny swore, he would swear before a judge he looked almost disappointed.

“Oh,” he said, and his voice was different when it had been resting for hours; rough-edged and thick, “You're,” and then Johnny was rolling over him and kissing him hard into the pillow.

He didn't let up: barely for air but certainly not for words. He thought if he had to listen to Daniel speak right then, he'd lose his mind. And anyway, it was time he listened to Johnny for once.

During the night, all the borders in his head were rearranged; dismantled and moved; half-reconstructed before the project was abandoned altogether and now it was no man's land. Thought and action and desire and anger and longing and terror: a wasteland of barbed wire and blasted-out craters he was going to crawl his way bloody through in order to reach him.

He brought a hand up to tip his head, open it for him. Reached down with his other and shoved at their boxers until there was nothing between them. The way it should always be.

He bent Daniel in half and got a hand around both of them and thrust like he was doing something else entirely.

His grip was too dry and movements too rough and erratic, but he couldn't stop, and anyway, Daniel wasn't asking him to. He was clinging to his shoulders, his neck and making these desperate, ragged noises in what space between their mouths Johnny allowed, which wasn't much, and he could just take it, anyway, because Johnny was taking it and it was killing him.

It was fucking killing him, Daniel.

24 Congress Pkwy to N Wabash Ave & E Ontario St

Afterwards, Johnny rested on his side, knees sticking out off the bed. Daniel curled up around his back and ran a hand through his hair.

“You should call your mom first thing after breakfast,” he said quietly. “I'm not getting on a bus until you do it, Johnny.”

Promise? he thought dully. Aloud, he said, “I know, just – not here. I don't want to do it where,” people walking through the common room could overhear. “I'll just. Find a payphone on the street or something.”

“Okay,” said Daniel, and his careful tone made Johnny's hands ball into fists, hidden beneath his pillow. He stared unblinking at the far wall.

“But I want to get the car first.”

A mouth pressed against his temple.

“Okay,” said Daniel again.

They don't talk on the way to get the Avanti, and don't say much after they pull out of the parking ramp. Daniel told him to try driving around a few blocks; Johnny agreed. He made it exactly one before Daniel spotted some payphones half a block down on Ontario. Johnny parked in front of a Bloomingdale's department store.

He wasn't ready. It was too soon.

This whole thing was an objectively stupid idea. Like sticking one's finger in a wall socket during a thunderstorm, or walking a conveyor belt into a meat grinder, like those kids in that fucked up Pink Floyd movie. Were humans the only animal to hurt themselves on purpose? This was why they were stupid, all of them.

Daniel was watching him, which was kind of unbearable, so Johnny got out of the Avanti. He heard the other boy climb out too, gently shutting the passenger door.

He surreptitiously wiped his hands on his jeans and rounded the back of the car. He took a few steps down the sidewalk towards the phones and you know what, no.

“I can't,” he said, turning back. He shook his head and started for the driver's side, side-stepping Daniel when he tried to grab his shoulders. “No, stop. I'm not gonna do it.”

“Yes, you are,” he said, quickly sliding around, getting in between Johnny and the car door. He put his hands up, forestalling. “You have to, you have to know—”

“Know *what*?” he shouted and it was all too much.

There were limits to a person, to him. He almost shoved Daniel and only stopped himself by smashing his fist down on the Avanti instead. And then he did it twice more, because it was the only thing that felt right for the moment. The only thing that made sense.

Daniel watched him do it, mouth going tight.

“What do I need to know, Daniel?” he asked. “That my mom hates me? That she's disgusted, that she regrets the day I was born, or, or, maybe like. What if she's all fucked up about it? Like, maybe she thinks she did something wrong. It's my mom, my fucking mom and she.” His voice cut out like someone switched the channel. He turned and leaned against the car, staring blindly at the street, resolved to say no more. He didn't think he could, even if he wanted to.

“She's your mom, so maybe you should give her a chance,” said Daniel after a moment.

Johnny shook his head minutely.

“Look, okay – Johnny, look at me. Look at me, man.” He pulled at his arm and jostled it. He kept at it until Johnny finally turned his head, though he couldn't meet his eyes. “If it goes as badly as you think it will – if she's— look. You'll be fine, okay.”

Wrong; he wouldn't even exist anymore. How could he not understand that?

“You'll come with me, no big deal. We'll park the Avanti somewhere nice and safe in the most expensive lot in the city we can find, and we'll hand them your stepdad's credit card,” and here, Johnny's mouth twitched slightly against his will; Daniel sounded more sure as he

finished, “and we'll go to Jersey on the bus. You'll be fine. Either way, you are going to be fine.” He paused. “But you have to make that phone call.”

Johnny didn't move for a long moment, staring hard at the street, the paltry crack of sky he could see between the buildings. It was so claustrophobic here.

After a moment, adrenaline spiked the way it always did right before a match, and he used it to shove off the Avanti, not looking at Daniel. He dug into his pocket for some change and quickly crossed the wide sidewalk to the bank of payphones.

He chose the least grody one of the set and picked up the receiver. He inserted a quarter and slowly punched in the familiar number, each button feeling like the next part of launch code for something that could obliterate half of North America.

He stared at the graffiti on the side of the box as he listened to the line ring. Call Tammy for a good time but the number was crossed out in heavy black marker; guess she changed her mind.

And then, in his ear and two thousand long miles away, she said, “Hello, this is Laura Lawrence.”

His voice cracked. “Mom?”

Limbo on the Loop

She says:

You have surprised
her every day
of your life. she never
knows what to expect
next. and please understand
it's been the very best
part of being
a mother.
your mother.

Do you remember
that one boy, third grade (and no,
you don't, but apparently)
you wanted
to get him a birthday present;
you liked when
he smiled. nothing bad
could start so
sweet?

And anyway, *this*
is only one part
of a greatly beloved
you.
does a miracle
stop being
a miracle
because she doesn't
understand it immediately?

For so long
it was just the two

of you and maybe
that seems like forever
ago, but to her it was
fucking yesterday.
you are not some pet or project
she's going to just
give up.

There hasn't been a day
she hasn't thought
of you:
her only one.
she, you – *we*
will work it out together. no one
is more important
so please, please
come home, johnny.

1353 Feet Above the Ground on a Perfectly Clear Day

“Would you take a look at that. We got to see a few more states together.”

Without looking away from the sprawling view, Johnny reached over and gently pushed his head. “You're so corny, it's embarrassing.”

“That's nothing. I can do better, just give me a moment.” He went quiet, though, and when he spoke again it wasn't corny so much as subdued. "Look at the lake. Doesn't seem so big from up here. New Jersey or California don't feel like they could be all that far away."

"Far enough," said Johnny, but he didn't want to think about that right now. He wrapped his hands around the guardrail along the window, trying to feel the building. “I thought it'd sway more? Tallest building in the world, they said it sways in the wind.”

“Guess it's not that windy.”

“Yeah, guess not.”

Daniel leaned back and looked around the observation deck. There were only three other visitors, standing along the other side. Johnny had already scoped them out – specifically, their heights.

“Security's not hanging around,” said Daniel, pulling at his arm. “C'mon.”

“Seriously? There are,” and he jerked his head at the other people.

“Who cares? This is like, a once in a lifetime opportunity here, we can't pass it up.” He stepped back a few feet and stood looking at him, expectant. When Johnny only gazed back, unmoved, he rolled his eyes. “Don't think I won't do it by myself. I'm leaving this building a karate god.”

Johnny stepped back from the railing and faced him. “We can do this, so long as you stop saying karate god.”

“Because it's embarrassing?”

“Incredibly.”

They bowed to each other, eyes intent. They straightened.

“How you feeling, Johnny?” asked Daniel softly.

He smiled. “Did you know, right now I'm the tallest person in the whole world?”

And they began the kata.

Union Station

The Great Hall was a massive, bright space topped with skylights, and full of people with places to be. Johnny felt restless just watching the milling crowd, which was maybe why he started to wander when Daniel got in the long line for the Greyhound ticket counter.

“You abandoning me already?” asked Daniel when he was a few feet away. Johnny spun on his heel, a dart of dread passing through his chest, but the other boy raised his hands, already looking apologetic. “Sorry, kidding.”

Are you? he thought. He rejoined him in the queue, but Daniel nudged him with his elbow.

“I'll find you, just don't – jump a train to Saint Paul or something.”

So Johnny lightly smacked him upside the head and went off to explore.

The people coming and going through the station all looked like they had a story, some better than others.

He watched a man in an expensive business suit drop his suitcase and fumble for his pager, shortly thereafter jogging over to the payphones along the far wall.

He watched an old couple stop in their tracks in the center of the hall, absorbed in arguing over a map of the city; he didn't know what language they were speaking, but it was very fast, and seemed suited to domestic squabbles.

He watched a mother loaded down with shopping bags somehow wrangle four small children, her eyes sharp and seemingly all-seeing. When he passed them, she was snapping at the eldest for climbing on top of one of the center benches and sprinting down the length of it, uncaring of those seated in his way.

All these people eventually moved on, or would soon – and so would he, and Daniel, and probably others would take their place.

He discovered the sleek, dark bar near the Amtrak terminal and a little while later, Daniel discovered him.

“You're not going to go off the deep end when I'm not around, are you,” he asked, walking up to the small table. He eyed the tall pint glass sitting in front of Johnny. “Like you're not going to do a bar crawl from here to the Pacific, right?”

That actually sounded pretty awesome, come to think of it. Was there a Guinness Book of Records entry for longest bar crawl? Johnny was up to the task.

“Think I'll go back through Iowa,” he said. “So worst thing that can happen is I drive into a corn field.” He lowered the glass and said quickly, “Relax, I'm just joking.”

“Are you?” But he sat down and stole some of Johnny's beer, because Daniel talked like a nerd but was secretly always game. Johnny could probably convince him to do a cross-country bar crawl, if he threw enough sex into the bargain.

“This place is pretty cool,” he said. “Did you know they let you take drinks on the train? And some of the trains have dining cars. You can cross the country and just be drunk the whole time.” And because trains sucked, you'd probably want to be.

Daniel raised his eyebrows. “You know, a lot of them have sleeper cars, too.”

He paused, a revelation brimming over the horizon. “What's that, like __”

“Beds, Johnny. Private cars with beds.” He puts his arms on the table and gave him a significant look.

“You mean, we could go drink in one car and then go back and,” alright, so maybe trains didn't suck after all. Jesus.

Daniel smiled and looked down at the table. After a second, he said, “Next bus leaves in an hour.”

And just like that, all fantasies of an epic cross-country train sex and beer bonanza flew out of his head. He took the pint back and said, “Oh.”

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah.”

An Alcove at the End of the World

As the minutes ticked down, something shifted between them. Johnny was prepared for – well, okay, nothing, absolutely nothing. But he was even less prepared for Daniel being the one to lose it.

He didn't know what to do, because Daniel always took basically everything in stride – unless he was pissed, in which case all bets were off. But he wasn't angry then. He was upset, and it was so much worse than anything Johnny could've imagined.

They stood in a corner of a less-trafficked hallway, half-hidden behind a pillar. And Daniel was still talking a good game, but he'd lost all ability to sound like he meant it. He kept muttering *it's fine* and *you're okay?* and *I'm good*, but it wasn't exactly convincing, because he was saying it into Johnny's neck. His hands were tight on Johnny's hips, thumbs hooked into the waistband of his jeans, nails pressing hard against his skin, and it wasn't even a sex thing, more like he didn't want to let go.

The idea of Daniel's absence felt like a physical impossibility. Or – no. It wasn't that he couldn't imagine it, but he didn't want to. The version of him from a week ago already felt like a stranger.

In karate, if you don't practice a move regularly enough, you lose the feel for it. Might he slip back bit by bit, as the hours and days and weeks dragged by, and he lost the memory of how this felt? And even if there was no going back, what did forward look like without so much as a map to guide him.

Soon, too soon, his hands were going to be empty. In answer to that thought, he tightened his grip around Daniel's shoulders.

He wanted to tell him everything: that he was maybe the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He wanted to tell him things he didn't even know yet. Discoveries he'd make tomorrow, or in a week from now, and who else would he share them with?

He wanted to tell him, even if something happened and they never saw each other again, he'd never forget him.

Picking Daniel up that day outside Victorville was matched only by

the moment he saw his first dojo – in both cases, he didn't know enough to even comprehend what it would be to belong to something, someone. But the wanting was there, a flicker of something half-buried at the bottom of a stream, and just that was enough to feel alive. It was because of Daniel that he stumbled on it again.

But telling him all that wouldn't solve their problem, which was that Daniel was leaving. And given the way he was clinging to Johnny, he thought it might make it worse. Twist of the knife. So he couldn't really say anything but *yeah, it's fine,* parroting Daniel's idiotic words right back at him, creating a perfect idiot loop of lies neither of them could even pretend to believe for the span of a second.

They lied to each other and held on for as long as they could.

225 S Canal St

Their actual goodbye was both easier and harder, because it happened on the street surrounded by people, and they couldn't really touch.

Daniel looked away from where the driver was helping load people's luggage beneath the bus. “You know – know what I just realized?”

“What?”

“We should've done Navy Pier – the Ferris Wheel, I mean. It would've been nice, I think.” He nodded to himself.

“Oh,” said Johnny. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, maybe.”

Daniel's jaw worked, and honestly, he wished Daniel would look away. Watching him fake his way through this was clawing at Johnny's insides. Why couldn't he avoid eye contact like a normal person.

“But don't worry, I'll do better,” Daniel declared, and his eyes were bright. “I got it covered. I'll have nothing to do in Parsippany. Just wait, I'll have a whole list when I come back to the valley. It's going to be – *so* impressive, gonna really knock your socks off.”

“List?” asked Johnny, for the sake of saying something.

“Of plans,” he clarified. “Romantic stuff.” He gestured with his hand, like he was presenting the as-yet-unwritten list in the air for Johnny to see and marvel at.

Johnny rubbed a knuckle over his eyebrow. He didn't think Daniel's plans were very romantic. You either did something or not, no need to go recreating Operation Overlord. Most romantic thing Daniel ever did or probably would do was nearly kill them both in Missouri; it said a lot.

“You know that Johnny Cash song?” he said abruptly to Daniel. “The one where the guy steals a part of a Cadillac from work every day, and it takes years and years but eventually he puts it all together to make a full car, but it's like. A monstrosity. I mean, impressive DIY automotive work, sure, but yeah, like a total joke.” He shifted on his feet. “Anyway, you know that song?”

Daniel stared at him, confused. “I think so?”

“That's what your plans are like,” he said. Plans weren't romantic and neither was Daniel. So long as he went through life thinking otherwise, the world was doomed. Johnny most of all.

Daniel rolled his eyes, finally looking away, and Johnny could breathe – the desperate gulp of air a drowning man takes before he sinks below the surface again.

“Very funny, you're always so funny,” said Daniel thickly. Then: “Oh, here—”

He dug into the pocket of his shorts and pulled out a piece of paper. It looked like the torn corner of one of the maps from the car, and on it was a phone number.

“That's my uncle's number. So you can.” He gestured again, throat working. “You know.”

Johnny took the number and looked down at it. “Yeah. Thanks.”

The crowd outside the bus was dwindling. Most of the luggage was stowed and people were getting settled in their seats.

“So uh,” said Johnny, trying to think of something, something he could say that would be the right thing. The perfect thing. What he came up with was, “Don't get into any fights in New Jersey.”

“Fights? I don't get into fights back home.” And when he couldn't ignore the disbelief on Johnny's face, he added, “Hey, I'm serious. There's no need, everybody speaks my language there.”

“You mean, what. You all – talk loudly at each other other until someone leaves or dies?”

“Now you get it,” laughed Daniel. His voice was getting more awful by the second, and Johnny wanted to beg him to stop trying. “Look at you. Quick learner.”

Yeah, that was it. He was done.

He looked away and pulled Daniel into a one-armed hug. Daniel's arms came around his sides. Johnny stared hard at the top of Union Station, eyes tracing the columns up and down and up and down and up and down and up and down and up and down and up and down and then Daniel was stepping back.

They looked at each other.

“Are you going to be okay?” asked Daniel.

“I will. Don't worry,” he said after a moment, and the worst part was, it was maybe even true. He didn't think he'd forgive himself if it was true. What kind of person could get past this; could keep walking and talking and driving like the reason for their heartbeat wasn't gone.

Daniel nodded and looked down. He seemed smaller somehow.

“I,” and Johnny had to force the words out, “I'm gonna miss you.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Daniel, and the words came out easily enough for him. Not surprising.

He deserved something like that in return: feelings, freely given. Johnny tried to come up with something, but his thoughts kept launching themselves off cliffs and disappearing. None came back; turned out his mind produced stones, not boomerangs.

There was no one else left outside the bus. Daniel looked over his shoulder at it, and Johnny looked at Daniel, the backwards edge of his profile.

“Okay, well,” said Daniel.

“Yeah.”

Daniel's stance shifted, heels lifting like he was about to do a kick, but instead he launched himself at Johnny, arms going around his neck one more time. He pressed a rough kiss to his cheek, the stupid brave idiot, and slipped backwards just as quickly as he'd come.

Johnny felt like he should be falling, probably. No mat to break his fall.

Daniel jogged over to the bus, hands fumbling with the front of his backpack for his ticket. He got it out and swung the backpack over his shoulder. He put one foot on the bus and looked back at Johnny and then he disappeared up inside.

Johnny took his hands out of his pockets.

He stepped a couple feet to the side, to watch through the back window as the Daniel-shaped shadow made its way down the aisle, glancing left and right for an open seat. He watched as he found one

and shuffled in and sat down, and then he couldn't see him anymore, but he kept watching as the bus's engine groaned into another gear and let out exhaust that drifted up into the air, joining the general city haze; kept watching as the bus doors finally closed and the brake lights came on and off and the turn signal flashed, and it was moving.

He watched until the bus turned a block down, and Daniel was lost to some other road.

Somewhere on S Wacker Dr

It was quiet in the Avanti.

He knew he needed to move; he was in a 20 minute parking zone and had already gotten one ticket from earlier in the day. Someone would be along again soon enough, and he needed to move.

...Iowa, right? Iowa, then Nebraska, Colorado. Utah. Probably a sliver of Nevada, he couldn't remember. Maybe he'd feel better once he was back in the west: Colorado. Or maybe when he reached Utah, hit the desert again. He could probably make Mountain Time that night if he didn't take any breaks.

But yeah he had to get out this place. The Midwest was meant to be left behind.

He sat and stared at the street some more: the wide intersection ahead that promised possibilities at every turn, false hopes. He was reluctant to start the car, because he knew once he did, he would have to start driving. And every mile would be diametrically opposed to Daniel's own vector, would take him further and further away.

But he was in a 20 minute spot, and he needed to go.

“Alright, alright,” he muttered and rubbed his face. He finally looked over at the empty passenger seat, and the scattering of trash in the footwell, the most prominent piece being the map of Chicago Daniel had bought in Cicero.

His throat grew tight and rage and frustration swelled and he grabbed it up roughly, fingers crumpling the paper. He thought about tossing it out onto the street. Something held him back. So instead he moved to shove it where he wouldn't have to look at it ever again, or at least until it didn't hurt anymore.

He jerked open the glove compartment and a postcard fell out.

After a second he recognized it as the one Daniel had written back in, what was it, New Mexico or Texas. He picked it up, glancing for a moment at the Santa Fe train yard, and turned it over.

His mouth twitched slightly and he had to shake his head; every available bit of white space outside the address line was covered in

dense, scrawling writing, like he had tried to narrate the entire trip blow-by-blow to his sensei. It was too much: Daniel being Daniel even in black ink. But Johnny's barely-there smile faded the longer he looked at it, remembering how Daniel agonized over every word only to give up in the end when he realized he had no way to send it.

And they'd sort of argued about it later: Daniel explaining to him with his infuriatingly stubborn, superior logic why he couldn't ask his sensei to come back, never mind how clearly torn up he was about the whole situation.

What had Johnny said? He was pretty sure he called him a pussy.

And he'd been *right*.

Johnny sat back in his seat and blinked again at the busy street. He was a little lightheaded.

When had Johnny started acting so fucking scared all the time?

Cringing and flinching at every juncture. When, when had he stopped reaching to take what he wanted? Stopped fighting for people? First his *mom*, now Daniel – Daniel who would never, not in a million years ask someone to come back for him, or stay with him, or put him first in any way. Even if it was clearly fucking him up.

Was Johnny going to be able to live with himself, knowing he'd had something real for a second and then let it board a bus and disappear without him saying everything – or really even anything? Even if Daniel came back to California, who would he be coming back to?

“What the fuck?” he said aloud. His hands shook a little as he reached for his key and slotted it into the ignition; turned it and then it was like the Avanti was voicing her own agreement: *what the fuck, kid.*

He fumbled the postcard carefully back into the glove compartment and picked up the map of the city, glancing at the intersection ahead of him and scanning to find his place. He found his route – it wasn't that hard, Daniel really was an idiot about this stuff, jesus. He buckled up and checked his mirrors and waited for a taxi to pass.

His pulse was fast but steady and his vision, clear. He was back in the game.

Johnny stepped on the clutch and shifted, and he and the Avanti leaped madly forward.

Barreling Down I-90 Around the Horn of the Great Lake Michigan

Daniel
(staring at the ceiling of the car)

The other drivers on this interstate don't know what they are up against out here; Johnny is from fucking Los Angeles. There is no competition.

Daniel feels a little stupid sometimes, thinking Johnny knows what's best for everyone. Johnny is really into it, and he's a lot more likable and personable than Daniel was at 20. Responsible for that kind of shit sometimes. He's going to look back on this and be glad.

Someday, he'll be glad.

Anyway, he's going to be patient and kind. The right move. Daniel can do that. It's not like Johnny's going to know what hit him. Sweet, to listen, will like when anyone else tries to give him advice or tell him what to do.

He sighs and shifts on the stiff bench, bringing his knees up to rest against the back of the seat in front of him. And because he's alone – well, kinda alone, in all the important ways, anyway – because he's alone, he allows himself to feel kind of really goddamn sad that no one is there to be annoyed about him putting his knees up. Because who cares if some random guy puts his knees up against a bus seat – except maybe the person sitting in front of him, sorry, ma'am.

He slides his knees down and great, now he can't even be comfortable.

The Avanti was comfortable.

Fuck, what if Johnny's stepdad *does* take the car away? What if Johnny has to say goodbye to the Avanti and Daniel's not there to hold him through it? And what if he has to get like, an Oldsmobile or something and Daniel's not there to try not to laugh at him?

They never even got to have sex over the hood. Sex on top of an Oldsmobile is probably no where near as hot.

Well, if Johnny is so sad, he can get his ass to Daniel's and help him work that one out for himself.

Who's he kidding, Daniel will be lucky if he gets to ever try to a coax another orgasm from that tall hot blond Eeyore of a boy. Who knows how long he's going to be stuck in Parsippany. A year ago he never imagined he'd go to Okinawa, and look how that turned out. (He

wonders if Kumiko has thought of him at all.) There's no telling what the future holds and really, the future should get on that. Stop being so unreliable. Where's its work ethic.

What's he doing? *Going to be okay* – God damn semis.

(*Is* he going to be okay? Is he going to take enough breaks on the road going back to California? Is he going to stop in some bar and get into a fight and have no one around for him to press his face against while sitting shirtless and vulnerable on a toilet – what's he going to do then, just keel over onto the floor? Probably, knowing him. And who is going to make him eat actual food or prod him into talking a little, because if you just bottle everything up – that's how you get explosions, Johnny. It's physics. And the physics of taciturn car-obsessed karate freaks is probably more volatile than the regular kind, hey, he's just assuming here.)

What the Johnny's going to be okay, when you're still driving crazy, but it's because you're happy? Johnny wakes, probably. And maybe first he's shocked to discover he's lost weight overnight, and then he's holding his own, at least. He'll be fine.

Anyway, that's what matters.

God, he can't believe they never had sex over the hood of the Avanti. What was he *thinking*.

(It started as pure intellectual curiosity; they were in a gas station somewhere in the Ozarks, and he saw the box of condoms and yeah, he thought about it for a moment. You can't win at life if you close yourself off to possibilities! But he hasn't been like, raring to go or anything, it isn't something he remotely considered before. But feeling Johnny on top of him this morning, pinning him to the mattress and thrusting his way to the most desperate joint handjob to ever happen under the sun, it kind of broke his brain a little. So yeah, he's never thought about it, but now he's thinking about it, but he's probably never going to *get it*, and what's he supposed to do, explore in the shower some morning, sullenly fingering himself? God his life is *so* sad.)

He feels super unfair that people with visible disabilities have all the way more obvious reasons to cry in public. Whatever, he's not crying, he's just blinking a lot.

And here's the truth, which he can admit to himself, because he's alone-not-alone and if you can't be honest with yourself on a half-full bus, then you've got bigger problems.

But here's the awful truth:

For a brief moment – like, split-second, he's talking a fraction of time only atomic clocks can measure – when Johnny walked away from him to call his mom, Daniel hoped he'd have to come with him.

And it's horrible, okay, he knows it's horrible! What kind of terrible

person would wish for something like that, and this is why he's gotta draw this line for himself all the time, why he has to stick to principles, because he knows deep down he's actually this hungry, selfish prick. He knows it, okay. But when he thinks about what this ride would be like if Johnny was with him, it makes him want to die: Johnny sitting next to him, one foot hanging down the aisle because he has stupid long legs. Johnny brooding over the Avanti back in some parking garage and Daniel working to distract him. And when they got to New Jersey? He'd probably have to borrow some of Uncle Louie's old clothes; just the thought of Johnny sitting around in one of those goddawful sweaters makes Daniel want to cry tears of joy.

And has Johnny ever seen snow? Real snow, now, not the rich person "oh, we're going to the mountains to ski and wear turtlenecks around a fire while sipping obnoxious martinis" snow. Daniel bets Johnny gets all pink in the face in the cold. And he's got like, no body fat because he's an animal built for performance (and what performance!) rather than survival, so Daniel would have to keep him warm all the time, and boy, would he.

Finally, he gives up; so he barely made it one state over, that's how long his resolve lasted. Pathetic.

Daniel finally gets back past the border and pulls over to the side of the road, searching for the Route 66 sign.

And there he is.

Dark, in the picture above. Half asleep, head thrown back against the seat, mouth open. Hair all over the place. Daniel looks away, heart thumping.

Fucking look where you're going, you stupid prick.

He barely manages to get his voice steady enough to park the car.

Jesus H. Christ, if he dies in the back seat, I'm going to be so pissed.

Hey, Daniel. Daniel, wake up. Daniel, look at me.

Daniel turns the photo away and sighs. He can't help but smile, anyway. He's already kinda hard.

He finally looks out the window,

And there he is.

Daniel stands.

He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen in the flesh. There, looking out at Jimmy's backyard, holding a cigarette, wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

He shouts something at the sky.

And I don't care if Daniel can hear it. I don't care if he can see me, because it's all there in my face, in that stupid grin.

Daniel gets up and goes around the side of the house, and I hear the gravel crunch as he disappears.

His parents still don't want to talk to me, and I'm not sure I want to talk to them either. I just want to watch him.

This is real.

He's driving Johnny to New Jersey, and I'm sure he'll be back soon, but I'll keep waiting for him. I always feel like this.

Luckily there's another scheduled Greyhound stop coming up.

Gary

Speechless was a good look on Daniel.

The bus pulled off at Gary and stopped into a rundown blue and white station. The traffic on the interstate was still audible, making the place feel transitory – like anything could happen there, because no one was looking. And even if they were, Johnny figured: let them look. They got a problem, see if they can catch the Avanti afterwards.

He slowly followed the bus into the lot and then parked down away from the scattering of other vehicles. It gave him plenty of time to climb out from behind the wheel, lean back against the Avanti's trunk, and watch Daniel make his way off the bus and cross to him.

His eyes were big in his face, hands fidgeting over the strap of his pack. He seemed almost uncertain as he approached Johnny. Like he still wasn't sure what was happening, or why. Maybe he thought Johnny was here because he forgot something in the car.

Regardless, he really wasn't moving fast enough, so Johnny shoved off the car, took three steps and grabbed him up. Daniel dropped his bag in surprise, hands scrambling for purchase around his shoulders. Right where he was supposed to be, that's right.

“I ran out of gas on purpose,” said Johnny, conversational as he turned to set him down on the Avanti. Now that was a pretty picture. He'd buy this charity calendar.

Daniel blinked and shook his head slightly, not understanding.

Johnny's hands flexed over his hips. “That first day? Before we even left California, man. I did it on purpose.”

He finally found his voice. “Why would—”

“I didn't want it to be over. And I mean, I didn't think I even really *liked* you then.” He lost control of his smile. “So why would I let you go now?”

“Oh, and you like me now?” said Daniel, a shade of his usual bravado in his voice.

“I mean, you're alright.”

Daniel looked down at the sight of Johnny bumping against his knees and then up at him, going Popeye against the sun at Johnny's back. He tilted his head to block it, so he wouldn't have to squint, and Daniel blinked and searched his eyes.

“What about – you know, California, and your, your mom—”

He shrugged. “I'll call her, tell her I'll be a little while longer. Because I have something really important I need to take care of first.” And it was incredible to think he could do that and know she'd still be there when he got back: that she always would be.

Daniel swallowed. “Johnny, I, uh. I—”

“I'm going to drive you to New Jersey,” he interrupted, because he knew if he didn't, he'd never get a word in otherwise. “And I'm not saying you're going to shut up, because fuck knows you never will, and god help me, Daniel, I even kind of like it – but you are going to let me do it. You're going to start letting me do a lot of things.”

Let me take care of you for once, is what he meant, though by the way Daniel blushed he was probably thinking along his usual, different set of tracks. This probably wasn't helped by Johnny stepping in closer; Daniel's knees made way for him like he wasn't even conscious of it. Johnny dropped his forearms to the metal on either side of him.

“Though I don't know if we're taking the I-80 connection,” he added, consulting the map in his head. “Did you know it's like, solid tolls the entire way? They want people to actually pay for the pleasure of seeing Indiana and Ohio. And fucking Pennsylvania? I know I've never been, but I have a hunch it's all going to be a really underwhelming experience. So I was thinking, what we do is, we swing up through Michigan to Canada. Follow the border along the lakes and—”

“Johnny.”

He slipped upwards, eyes on Daniel's lips, which were starting to smile. There, that one. “Yeah?”

“Anyone ever tell you, you talk too much?” asked Daniel, and he got a hand around the fabric of his shirt and dragged Johnny forward those last few inches into an open-mouthed kiss.

And for a brief moment in September of 1985, Johnny figured Gary, Indiana was the most beautiful place in the whole universe.

Parsippany

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was late when they got into Parsippany, and Daniel acted like an uptight dick about turning on any lights, so he really shouldn't be giving Johnny grief if he knocked into things as he tried navigating a house he'd never been inside before.

“Shh,” he hissed at the foot of the stairs. “We gotta be quiet, I told you. Louie says he's a really light sleeper.”

“You are the one doing all the talking,” Johnny whispered back, because the point needed to be made.

“This wouldn't even be an issue if we'd arrived earlier. You and your stupid detours—”

“Toll roads are un-American and I hate them.”

“Oh and fleeing to Canada the moment you're a little inconvenienced is *so* American.”

Johnny had no response he could make to that, so he put Daniel in a headlock. They banged into the wall a couple times in their struggle and fell against the stairs.

They were in a dark house that held only some old man asleep down the hall, and Johnny was only human, so once he got Daniel's arms under control, he dug his knees in against the stairwell and covered his mouth. It was a foolproof technique for ending arguments, and one he'd been perfecting for a few days now. Johnny was a quick study at some things, the important things.

He kissed him long and slow, until Daniel stopped pushing against him and started smiling. Then he put his head back and looked down at him and whispered:

“There's like, a guest bedroom in this place, right? We're not sleeping on a sofa?” Not that he wouldn't take eight hours with Daniel lying on top of him, but on a spectrum of good to great, he knew which he preferred.

“Oh, there's a bed,” said Daniel brightly.

He led Johnny up the stairs to a small bedroom, and then left him there to go putter around checking on his uncle and performing other mystery middle-of-the-night house-sitting chores.

Johnny absently stripped off his shirt and jeans and socks and then wandered the room, looking at the photos on the wall.

It was always kind of weird, seeing other people's families; his own was so small, and aside from one small photo album his mom had, he'd never seen many photos of extended family. But Louie LaRusso had a ton of photographs.

Some were black and white, and the people in them wore strange old suits and dresses, with weird hair styles and stern expressions. It seemed like there were a lot of people, too. He wondered if Daniel ever felt weird, looking at these kinds of photos, being an only child after generations and generations of big families. A river of people stretching back through the years and across continents, slowly dwindling down to just he and his cousin in a tiny state in America.

Daniel's mom was in one of the more recent, colored frames. She was young and very pretty and *very* sixties with a pixie cut and short dress, standing arm-in-arm between two dark-haired men. Her eyes were lit up, smiling wide at the camera: Daniel's smile.

“That's my mom and dad,” said Daniel behind him. “I mean, and Uncle Louie.”

Johnny glanced over his shoulder to see him set a pair of glasses filled with water down. He come up behind Johnny and pressed a kiss to his bare spine.

He looked back at the photograph, eyes now going to the man on Lucille's right, who looked – “He looks a lot like you.”

“I look like him, you mean.”

“Same difference.” It was all about perspective, he supposed; Daniel was Johnny's, so the man in the photo looked like him. “How's your uncle? Did he wake up?”

“Briefly. I told him we were here just so he doesn't freak out if he hears someone walking around in the middle of the night.”

This made Johnny reach out past Daniel and test the mattress for squeaking – and immediately regret doing so because of the look that came over Daniel's face right after. He withstood the obnoxious leer, by which he meant he turned and pinned its owner to the bed.

“I suppose,” he said between dragging kisses, hands slipping up his shirt to palm smooth skin, “we should probably go to bed.”

“Yeah,” said Daniel, clearly not listening. He struggled up onto his elbows, trying to get his plaid shirt off while also somehow pulling Johnny over him. It was so amusing, Johnny wasn't even going to help him prioritize. He liked it when Daniel's brain stopped working; it was like watching a trainwreck without having to worry about casualties.

“Been a long day and all,” he continued, ducking his head to nuzzle his neck. He ground down against him briefly, enjoying the whimpering noise Daniel made.

“Mm, so long,” he said in unthinking agreement. He'd managed to trap his own arms in the shirt. He huffed in frustration against Johnny's ear.

Johnny popped back up to give him the most chaste peck he could manage and said, “Okay, so goodnight.”

And then he rolled off of him and over onto his side and pretended to go to sleep.

It was a miracle they didn't wake the uncle up during the wrestling match that followed.

The morning announced itself with a weight on the bed next to him and a thoughtful munching sound. Johnny peered through his lashes at the boy sitting cross-legged next to his face, digging through a box of plain Cheerios. Johnny shut his eyes again.

“I caught that,” said Daniel.

“'Cause you're a creep,” muttered Johnny thickly. He rolled onto his front and slung an arm over Daniel's lap, determined to go back to

sleep.

But Daniel did not take the hint.

“So, talked to my mom, told her I'd arrived and that Uncle Louie was fine, yadda yadda,” said Daniel, digging a hand into his box of cereal. “And she was kinda upset.”

Johnny made a vague questioning noise: not too worried, because if Daniel was telling him this through a mouthful of dry cereal, it couldn't be that bad.

“Apparently Mr. Miyagi came home. And he called *her*, looking to talk to *me*, which is when she found out he hadn't driven me *here*, so.”

Johnny cracked open his eyes and looked up at him. The punk shrugged like, *no big deal,* but his mouth was pinched against a pleased smile.

“Oh,” he said slowly. “Really?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Don't start.”

“Oh, I'm gonna start, and I'm not gonna stop,” he said, lunging up over him, squashing the cereal box and ignoring Daniel's squawk of protest. Johnny dug between them for the box and tossed it to the side, spilling Cheerios across the bedspread and carpet. “So your sensei came home, huh.”

Daniel sighed.

“Your sensei came home and was wondering where you were,” he continued, lying heavily on top of him. “And little did he know, it turned out Daniel LaRusso was off across the country being super dramatic, what a shocker—”

“*I*'m super dramatic?” he said, eyes going wide in outrage.

“—going, oh, poor me, no one loves me. Getting abducted by a pervert in the desert should show them.”

“I mean,” he said, with a sly smirk; sliding his leg places it had no business going this early in the morning, “I kinda did get abducted by a pervert in the desert, but I think it worked out alright. I think me and the pervert are going to very happy together.”

Johnny had no response to make to that except to violently tousle his

hair. Daniel shut his eyes and made a face.

He rolled off him and settled on his back again, closing his own eyes. They had no road to travel today, and *he was going to sleep in, Daniel.*

Daniel still didn't get the message, though, because he kept talking in his ear. “So, uh. What do you think about sticking around for a few days? Taking a breather before you head back home?”

Johnny smiled a little. He put a hand behind his head and said into the warm, waiting darkness of his eyelids:

“Yeah, guess I could stay in one place for a little while.”

Chapter End Notes

POSTSCRIPT: Laura gets the house in the divorce. And the Avanti.

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This fic tested my patience like nothing I've ever written before, whew. Staying present with the boys wherever they were while knowing what lay ahead... but, anyway, it was so worth it.

Heartfelt THANK YOU you to everyone who followed along on this ridiculous journey and especially thank you xJuniperx, who at this point with lawrusso fic is basically my accompanist; I'm here wailing into a microphone and she's 100 miles away on the piano, giving it all emotional context. <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!